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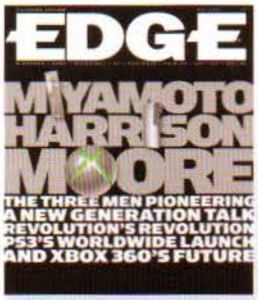




MIYAMOTO HARRISON MOORE

HE THREE MEN PIONEERING NEW GENERATION TALK EVOLUTION'S REVOLUTION S3'S WORLDWIDE LAUNCH ND XBOX 360'S FUTURE





Who is the most important man in videogaming today? It's the sort of question capable of fuelling a four-hour debate among gamers as they pick apart the obvious answers, the clever-clever candidates and the leftfield long shots.

The answer, of course, depends on your criteria.

Are you looking for a single visionary, someone whose imagination and creativity is driving a revolution in how we think about gaming? Step forward Shigeru Miyamoto.

Or, if it's all about 'power', what about the man who oversees all firstparty development for the world's single biggest videogaming force? It's likely that many of the best games on what seems set to be the leading next-gen platform will be supervised by Sony's Phil Harrison.

But then, as the world's largest software maker begins to move its focus further towards the potential of the videogame sector, isn't Peter Moore, the man with the overall responsibility for Microsoft's dedicated game division, best poised to shape gaming's future?

All three have good reason to stake claim to the title, so we've taken this opportunity to talk to each of them about their relative positions, and their perceptions of the future. If you do want to get into a four-hour argument about who is leading the videogame industry, then, this issue will give you the ammunition to make your case.

But for those who feel there must be an easier way to settle the question, we've taken the simple step of asking Miyamoto, Harrison and Moore, with their unrivalled insight into the heart of the industry, who *they* believe is the most important person in videogaming. Their answers may not surprise you, but some of their reasoning will.

Not that you have to agree with them, of course. But that's another four-hour fight waiting to happen.



EDGE

EDITORIAL
Future Publishing, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath, BA1 2BW
Telephone +44 (0)1225 442244
Fax +44 (0)1225 732275
Email edge@futurenet.co.uk
Edge website www.edge-online.com

PEOPLE ON EDGE
Tony Mott editor
Margaret Robertson deputy editor
Ian Evenden production editor
Duncan Harris writer
Christophe Kagotani Tokyo bureau
Darren Phillips art editor
Andrew Hind deputy art editor

CONTRIBUTORS
Brick Bardo, Steven Bailey, Mr Biffo, Brandon Boyer, Paul Drury, Geraint Evans, Mark Green, Tim Guest, Dennis Hind, Jon Jordan, Peter Lyle, Simon Parkin, Gary Penn, Ben Schroder, Terry Stokes, Oliver Welsh,

PRODUCTION
Colin Polis Future Plus buyer
Kirsty Bell senior production coordinator
Rose Griffiths production manager
Kim Brown marketing executive

CIRCULATION
Russell Hughes trade marketing manager
Duncan Shearer group circulation manager

ADVERTISING
Jayne Caple advertising director
Scott Longstaff head of sales
Darren Gratton advertising manager
Ryan Ferguson online ad manager
Julian House recruitment account manager
Oliver Davis classifieds
Advertising phone 01225 442244

PUBLISHING
James Binns publisher
Simon Wear international licensing director

SUBSCRIPTIONS & DISTRIBUTION
Edge,
Future,
FREEPOST RLSC-SXSE-SKKT
Unit 4, Tower House, Sovereign Park,
Market Harborough, Leicestershire
LE16 PEF
Email: games.subs@futurenet.co.uk
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SENIOR MANAGEMENT
Roger Parry non-executive chairman
Greg Ingham chief executive
John Bowman group finance director

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"Aren't you a little young for full contact?"
"Aren't you a little old for videogames?"

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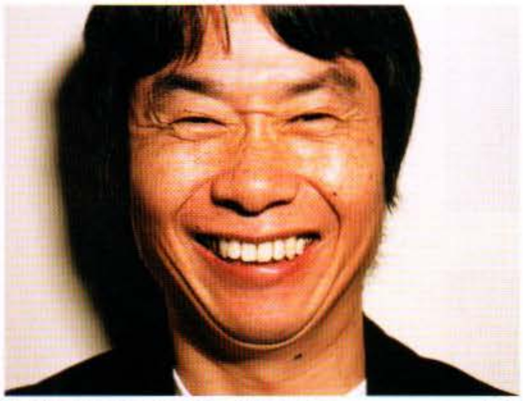
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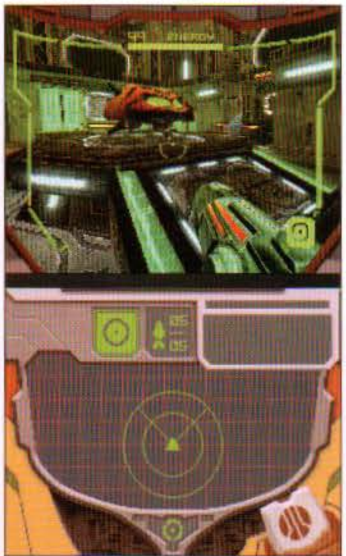
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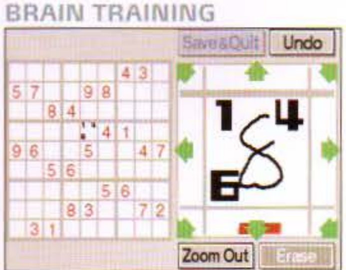
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START



EVENT

GDC expands horizons

New platforms enjoy an early summer as PlayStation 3 springs forward to fall



Queues for the keynotes, held in the neighbouring Civic Auditorium, stretched round the block and left many delagates disappointed. Those at the front passed the time with DSes

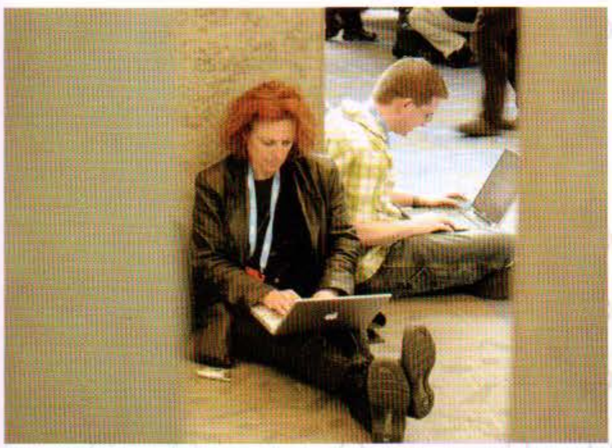
This year's Game Developer Conference, back for what is likely to be the last ever time in its spiritual home of San Jose, asked its delegates an unusually straightforward question: 'What's Next?' With a busier-than-ever timetable of technical lectures, philosophical roundtables, corporate keynotes and bar-based networking sessions, the answer most attendees will likely have come home with is 'a decent night's sleep'. The event, which also comprises two-day tutorial sessions, as well as the Serious Games Summit and GDC Mobile, adds up to one of the busiest weeks in the videogame industry calendar.

But despite promises of big news from the big players, it didn't add up to be one of the most dramatic. Sony had already shifted its limelight to Japan where, two weeks earlier, Ken Kutaragi had confirmed what was already obvious: that despite recent protestations from the company insisting it was still the intention, the promised spring launch for PS3 was unattainable. Blaming delays in implementing DRM controls on Blu-ray, Kutaragi revised the date to November, but offered in compensation the news that the launch will

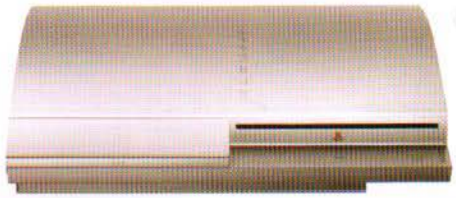


Sony is confident it can deliver six million PS3s worldwide by the end of its financial year in March 2007, which, if the machine does launch globally, is unlikely to satisfy demand

be worldwide. While this will be little comfort to those in Japan who were still expecting the machine in the spring, or to US gamers who had already assumed a post-Thanksgiving, pre-Christmas debut, it's obviously encouraging news for the European market, where many had fatalistically assumed the machine wouldn't debut until 2007. Thanks to a production capacity of a million units a month, Sony is confident it can deliver six million PS3s worldwide by the end of its financial year in March 2007, which, if the machine does launch globally, is unlikely to satisfy demand. The question now remains if that date, and that worldwide commitment, will prove more durable than the previous spring promise (see p60 for more on that question and others).



However, with the worst-kept secret in the videogame industry already out of the bag, Phil Harrison, president of Sony's worldwide studios, took to the stage for the opening GDC keynote in a slightly peculiar atmosphere – not helped by the decision to accompany his entrance with a quick burst of Another One Bites The Dust. GDC audiences are awkwardly split: mostly made up of developers, many of whom are already deep into PS3 projects, every word is also relayed by the media to consumers, who still don't know much more about the machine than the demos shown at E3 '05. And so, leaving the headline issues of RRP and controller design for E3 '06, Harrison instead focused on PS3's online environment. Revealing a plan which blends Xbox Live's sophistication with Sony's existing hands-off approach, Harrison sketched out an arena which radically shifts PS3's centre of gravity towards online. Taking full advantage of the 60Gb hard drive Kutaragi had confirmed would ship with every unit, it will give access to downloadable content and manage micropayments, enabling in-game shops and

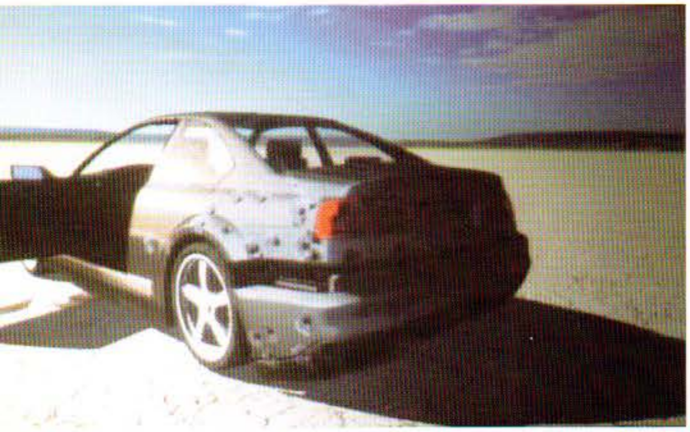


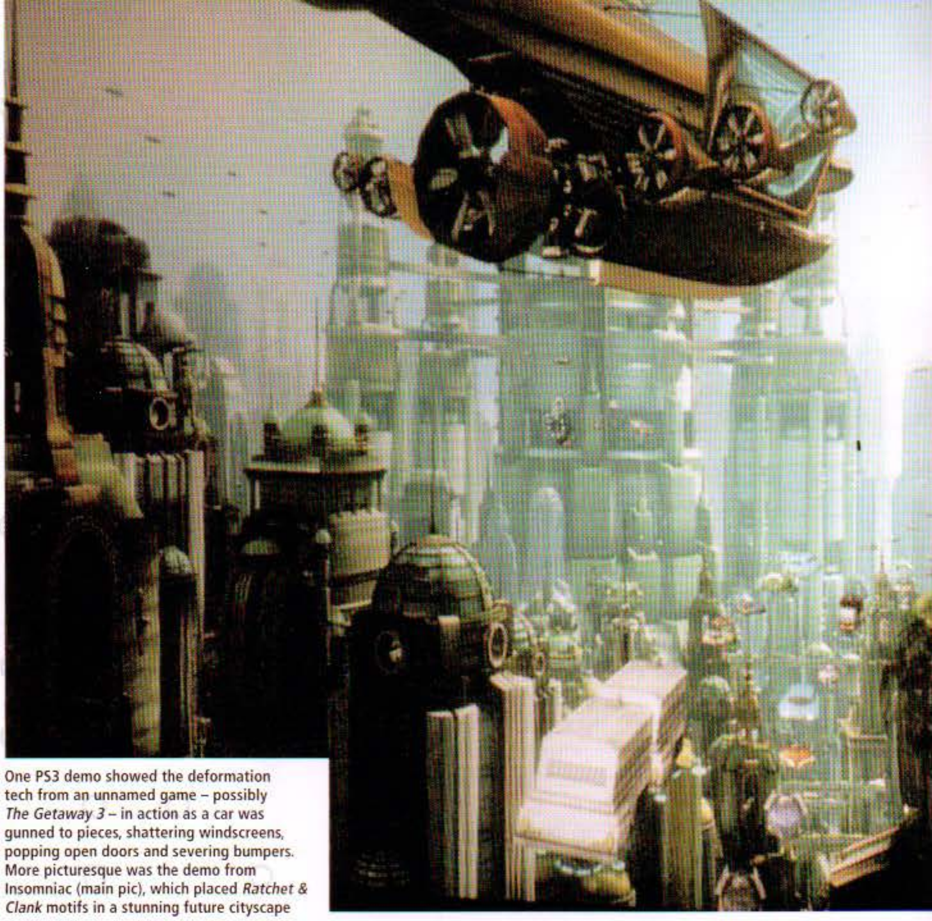
The revised PS3/PSP plans

Between them, Kutaragi and Harrison firmed up a raft of details for Sony's latest consoles:

- PS3 to launch worldwide in November
- Final PS3 devkits to arrive in May/June
- PS3 to ship with upgradeable 60Gb hard drive with Linux OS, and can function as home media server
- PS3 backwards compatible with PS1 and PS2 games
- PS3 online environment, with communication, ranking, content download and payment systems, to be available at launch
- All Sony PS3 games to be region-free, others at individual publisher's discretion
- PSP firmware upgrade to support Flash content
- PSP to support download to and booting from Memory Stick, allowing original games to be supported. Download and emulation also enabled for the 'entire PlayStation library'
- PSP digital camera to launch in October, for videochat and game applications
- PSP GPS receiver also to launch in October, for map applications and potential game use
- PSP devkit price drop to encourage new developers







One PS3 demo showed the deformation tech from an unnamed game – possibly *The Getaway 3* – in action as a car was gunned to pieces, shattering windscreens, popping open doors and severing bumpers. More picturesque was the demo from Insomniac (main pic), which placed *Ratchet & Clank* motifs in a stunning future cityscape

subscription management as well as giving thirdparty publishers the possibility of integrating their own servers and systems directly into PS3's infrastructure. Since downloaded content will be able to be booted direct from the hard drive, this creates the possibility of a whole new form of PS3 development – smaller, simpler games, sold directly to the consumer in a way reminiscent of Xbox Live Arcade but without Microsoft's editorial controls and download-size restrictions. Harrison made an open call for submissions of game proposals from interested developers, and there's no doubt that it could radically change the range of studios – and more importantly the range of games – for the console.

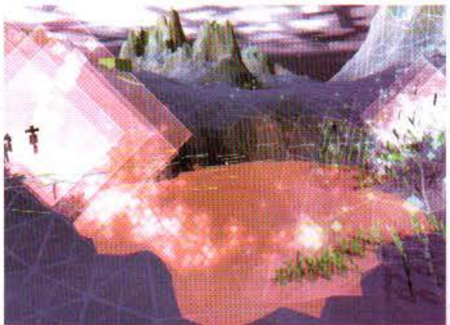
What the PlayStation 3 demos were most reminiscent of were last E3's 360 videos, when target footage had given way to real, unfinished, unpolished engine footage

And it was all the more important that these online possibilities proved so exciting because, on other fronts, the keynote did not succeed in convincing the audience of the value of the machine's power. A sub-aquatic follow-up to last year's rubber duck demo showed AI-controlled flocking fish and accurately modelled light refraction, but also demonstrated how much those two techniques look like existing systems for faking those two phenomena. A *MotorStorm* demo, which stripped out all other game elements to show how accurately a buggy's tyres could tear into soft mud, left those watching impressed with how realistically the suspension responded to the scars created in the ground, but less convinced



about why it mattered that the welds on the buggy's frame were accurately modelled and downright baffled as why the mud itself, when sprayed out behind the vehicle, looked so shoddy. A ragdoll demo, using the *Heavenly Sword* engine, showed the dramatic effect of explosions on a vast army of men, but also showed that the two things that next-gen can do best – scale and detail – are each other's enemies, since the scale of the army meant it was impossible to appreciate the detail in each model. Insomniac revealed its project previously codenamed *I-8* to be *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, a robust but so-far unremarkable FPS, leaving the closest the demos could come to a wow factor to its teaser for a new *Ratchet* game, featuring packed skyways of retro-styled flying cars.

All told, what the PS3 demos were most reminiscent of were last E3's 360 videos, when target footage had given way to real, unfinished, unpolished engine footage. Sony and its partners now have an extra six months to turn these powerful engines into something visually thrilling, but it was clear from the lukewarm response that those six months will need to be well spent. The



The gong show

One game casts a shadow over the rest at GDC

It was a colossal haul for the makers of *Ico* as their sequel swept the board at the Game Developers Choice Awards. Taking home the awards for Character Design, Visual Design, Game Design and Best Game of the Year, it barely let *Guitar Hero* get a look in for the Audio Design Award, *Nintendogs* for the Technology Award and *Psychonauts* for Best Writing. The surprise loser of the night was *God Of War*, which despite six nominations left empty handed. The Independent Game Festival Award was similarly a one-horse show, with Introversion's *Darwinia* taking the $20,000 Seumas McNally Grand Prize as well as awards for Technical Excellence and Innovation In Visual Arts. Collecting the award, Mark Morris made himself an instant hero among the development community – as well as a few instant enemies – by proclaiming that Introversion had stayed independent because they "didn't want a publisher to fuck up their game." It got the loudest cheer of the night.





The DS was omnipresent, both on Nintendo's stand, where it showcased *New Super Mario Bros* (see p40), and in the pockets and rucksacks of delegates



The PS3 *MotorStorm* demo was presented purely to showcase the effect of a buggy on mud, but it was impossible not to draw unfavourable comparisons with the game's debut at E3 2005 (left)

reaction was best summed up when some audience members shouted out to ask that the demos be shown on all the screens, not just the central unit. Harrison explained that only the central screen was showing in hi-def and a "Don't care!" came bellowing back, showing that, even among the development community, the holy grail of 1080p still isn't universally welcomed.

That concern was voiced very clearly at GDC's keynote roundtable, which brought together Mark Cerny, Dave Perry (ex-Shiny), **Louis Castle** (EA), Masaya Matsuura (NanaOn-Sha) and **Cyrus Lum** (Midway), where a wide-ranging array of concerns were raised about the viability of next-gen development. Lum pointed to a fourfold increase in the cost of producing assets for next-gen games and stressed the need for better communication between designers and artists in a world where it costs you "$2 million to change your mind". For Castle there was the concern, even from EA's perspective, on the danger of all games trying to be *all games*, rather than concentrating on their strengths – "over-scoping", in his words. Perry was characteristically outspoken about the industry's failure to predict the success of its products and self-confessedly 'paranoid' about the implications of digital distribution.

It was this latter question which proved to be the real theme of the conference. From a situation where there was once only one contender in the handheld arena, two or three under the TV and one on the desktop, there is now an explosion of outlets for games. And from a time when the



LEI FENG WINS

In its continued efforts to facilitate development of on-message, less subversive forms of gaming, the Chinese government this month released *Learn From Lei Feng*, an online game which teaches correct behaviour through the life of the famed People's Liberation Army leader, as part of its promised 12-part 'hero' series.

The online game is purported to require that the player act out the understated asceticism of Feng's life, from sock-mending to volunteering on building sites, to the ultimate endgame meeting with Chairman Mao – after several rounds of battles against secret service agents.

Newswire



EA's creative push

EA might still be shy of fulfilling its once-famous 'Challenge Everything' motto, but an announcement from worldwide studio director Paul Lee has proposed one considerable change to the publisher's approach. During the coming 12-18 months, Lee hopes to usher in a 20 per cent rise in the company's internally produced IP, reducing its licensed portfolio to only half its total output. Early examples of the procedural shift include the heavy promotion of Will Wright's *Spore*, together with new, more competitive project-management strategies affecting titles such as the upcoming *Medal Of Honor: Airborne* and three collaborative projects with Steven Spielberg. Other likely changes include more flexible deadlines than those imposed on EA Sports titles, and a general increase in studio autonomy.

SOUND BYTES

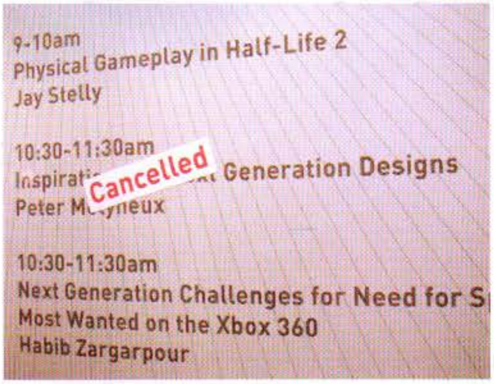
"You really want to be happy at an award ceremony, so I realised I didn't want to rant, I wanted to rave. Games are really totally amazing… They're interactive! There is feedback! No other art has this. I don't care whether you call it games or storytelling, it's all the same in my mind… Interactivity is important and can be more so if we do the right thing. Games are really cool, and that's my rant."
Chris Hecker vents light, not spleen, at the GDC 'Rants' session after receiving the Game Developer Choice Award for Community Contribution

"[PS3] has technical limitations. It seems to be incapable of rendering three-way sex scenes in realtime."
David Jaffe makes his case for a serious review of Sony's architecture at the company's GDC keynote

"[Today] I received final presentations for graduation development by Human Academy Osaka Game College. I didn't expect much from them, and I was right. Boys, work hard for your life!"
Japan's would-be next wave of developers can expect a 'See me' in red ink from Game Republic's **Yoshiki Okamoto**

"They use the characters everyone knows, and they hire those actors to be there, only to introduce minor characters. And then for the next hour they shoot and kill each other… I had absolutely nothing to do with the game and I disapprove. I think it's a misuse of film."
The Godfather game – a failure **Francis Ford Coppola** had Jack-all to do with





The lack of any standout sessions wasn't helped by the last-minute cancellation by Peter Molyneux of his 'Inspirations for Next Generation Designs' session. Rumoured to be deep in negotiations with Microsoft for the sale of Lionhead, word of the cancellation meant that quick-thinking blaggers could take advantage of his absence by using his name to get past the bouncers at some of the more exclusive parties



outlook for small to medium-sized developers looked bleak, there is now an actual scrap emerging for the games they can produce. Alongside the existing installed bases of PS2 and Xbox, which can support high-end projects like *God Of War* and *Dreamfall* as well as less ambitious projects, and the promise of Revolution, 360 and PS3, there are the new online services. PS3 and 360 will now be competing for downloadable, directly distributed games, and Nintendo's

Nintendo's president Satoru Iwata revealed that Revolution's 'virtual console' service will also offer certain Mega Drive and PC Engine games alongside Nintendo classics



This year's turnout demonstrated how substantially the development community has diversified beyond its twentysomething male stereotype

president Satoru Iwata, in his high-on-charisma, low-on-information keynote, revealed that Revolution's 'virtual console' service will also offer certain Mega Drive and PC Engine games alongside Nintendo classics. While there's been no confirmation of whether or not new games will also be downloadable, it's clear that there would be no technological barrier to it happening. On the handheld front, the potential of the DS to fulfill in the west the job it's already completed in Japan of growing the gaming market was made instantly convincing by the gift to delegates of a copy of the new US version of *Brain Training*: few sceptics remained after intensely competitive, intensely enjoyable mental-arithmetic battles broke out all over the conference. Kutargi's announcement that the new PSP firmware will allow downloaded games to be directly booted on the handheld adds that machine to the scrum for new content, and Valve, whose Steam service has rapidly become he flagship for a new model for PC distribution, was all but trawling the Independent Game Festival booths with a shopping trolley. Whereas last year the entire conference was dominated by a fear of what the task of producing monolithic next-gen epics would do to the industry, this year's was buoyed – and a little distracted – by the new possibilities.

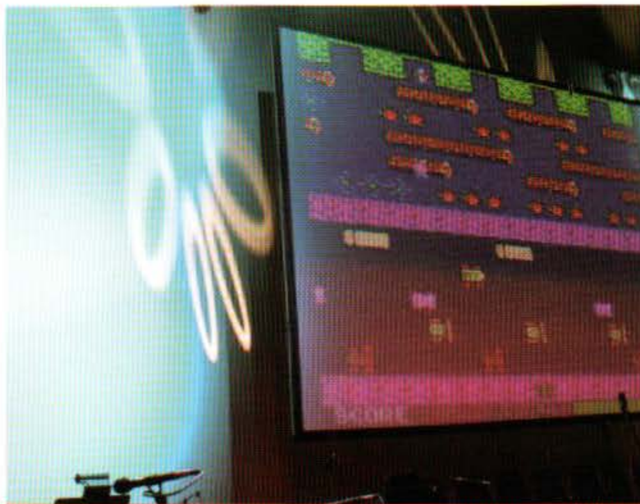
Last year that fear had crystallised in **Greg Costikyan**'s now-infamous proclamation during the 'Rants' session that "Ladies and gentlemen, we are fucked". This year, the other trend of the conference was clear in Chris Crawford's singular failure to replicate that moment by proclaiming that the videogame industry is dead and then sitting down and refusing to elaborate. This lack of impact



was a problem across the whole programme, which failed to deliver the standout sessions that generated so much energy at last year's event, and wasn't helped by a number of timetabling clashes. Without the excitement of something like *Spore*, the best sessions were still worthwhile: the team from *Shadow Of The Colossus* (which also won the Game Developer Choice Award for 2006 – see 'The Gong Show') captivated attendees with an explanation of how prioritising character and animation design had added to the game's emotional and narrative depth; ex Oddworld head Lorne Lanning grilling *God Of War*'s David Jaffe on some of his more outspoken attitudes; and producer Katsuya Eguchi explaining how making a game like *Animal Crossing* deliberately awkward can also increase its appeal.

Indeed, it was last year's news which dominated the event, or rather last year's games, in the form of Harmonix's *Guitar Hero* and almost anything on DS. Both were omnipresent throughout the festival, with Pictochat reaching meltdown before Iwata's keynote, as rumours of the official name for Revolution, claims of hands-on experience with the controller and lousy drawings of Mario flew round the room. *Guitar Hero* became a universal currency, with seemingly every developer waiting to publicly air the expertise honed in private. Each evening parties competed for attendees with promises of booths and in San Jose's hotels, queues snaked around plush corridors – two by two, like a human Noah's Ark – as rivals waited for their chance to prove their dominance.

And it's this atmosphere, as ever, which makes GDC so special. It's a vital reservoir of enthusiasm, expertise and open-mindedness which helps revitalise an industry all too often battered down by commercial pressures and intensive working practices. It's a conference where technical tips are shared as readily as tales of crunch-induced marital crises, and where widely differing interest groups are brought together in their determination to make games better and to make making games better. And, this year at least, to swap some fingering tips for Bark At The Moon.



Music to your thumbs

Video Games Live closed GDC with a packed concert of game music

It was clear it wasn't a normal concert from the moment you spotted Sonic lurking near the bar and Rikku from *Final Fantasy X* queuing for a go on *Guitar Hero*. Organised by veteran game music composer Tommy Tallarico, the Video Games Live shows bring together a live orchestra and choir, alongside a big screen and light show to try to do justice to the excellence of game music and the ardour of its fans. From *Frogger* (above) to *WarCraft*, from *Ghouls 'N' Ghosts* to *Halo* and featuring a cameo from internet-fad The Blindfold Pianist, it was a crowd-pleasing evening. It seemed a shame, however, that so many of the medlies and arrangements focused on bombastic battle themes rather than the more reflective music which often makes a deeper impression after repeated playthroughs, and that over-familiar tunes were chosen over more interesting and often better-written ones. That said, catering for such a peculiarly devoted audience can't be simple: often their cheering drowned out the orchestra, and their adulation was as much for the game itself than out of recognition, or appreciation, than for the music.



For the sixth year running, gameLab brought a live-action game to GDC, challenging players to be gods and convert believers in *Pantheon*. As ever, most delegates were simply too busy to play



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

It's an inevitability we've all (or all soon will) have to face... After a night entertaining crowds with a typically brilliant and energetic performance, after everyone's gone home and you promise yourself just one more solo round, it's then that you enter the zone and stun even yourself with a near-flawless run of Bark At The Moon.

Bringing a much-needed solution to the problem is Score Hero, an invaluable site for sharing your top *Guitar Hero* scores and streaks with the rocker community at large. With leaderboards for all difficulty levels the site is accessible for players of any ability but daunting at the same time as you realise, with photo evidence, that your treasured score doesn't hold a candle to others'.

The Score Hero community has also extended itself further to establish, as best it can, the cutoff points for the fabled five-star performances, proving itself the definitive resource to 'graciously document our future arthritis'.

Site:
Score Hero
URL:
www.scorehero.com



Trading faces

The ethical pain that faces the WCCF card collector

At the time of going to press, the most expensive single *WCCF* cards (typically special cards featuring game-turning superstars like Ronaldinho) being hawked on eBay were priced at £15, with whole sets at anything up to ten times that. Though the game's roster has been updated in the four years since its Japanese debut, old cards and cards from other regions can all still be read by current machines and deployed in any team anywhere. This has led to a familiar dilemma for the gameplaying football fan, and the ethical agonies are played out in threads at fan sites such as www.wccf-forum.co.uk – a Japanese Sol Campbell from 2003 is better than a European one from 2005. But is it morally justifiable to part with current footballing reality in pursuit of in-game glory?





ARCADE



Putting the 'I' back into team

World Club Champion Football, the coin-op designed for the collector, hits the UK

That *World Club Champion Football* is such a difficult thing to describe to those who've yet to witness it clearly signifies something. Whether that something is merely its status as novelty, rather than that Sega Europe has found an idea sufficiently inspired (and an experience sufficiently inimitable) to lure westerners back into arcades, remains to be seen. But since there are now about 15 units installed in marquee arcades across the UK – each hogging enough floor space for half a dozen vanilla *Street Fighter II* units and accompanied by a wall-mounted card-vending machine – we won't have to wait long to find out.

So, to that description. In order to begin playing *WCCF*, players must purchase a team – a £5 Starter Pack of cards from the vending machine. For that

There are now about 15 units installed in marquee arcades across the UK – each hogging enough floor space for half a dozen vanilla Street Fighter units

initial investment they receive a Club Card that stores player data, 11 handsome, laminated and licensed Player Cards (ie, a team), a clear plastic wallet for storage, and a basic set of instructions.

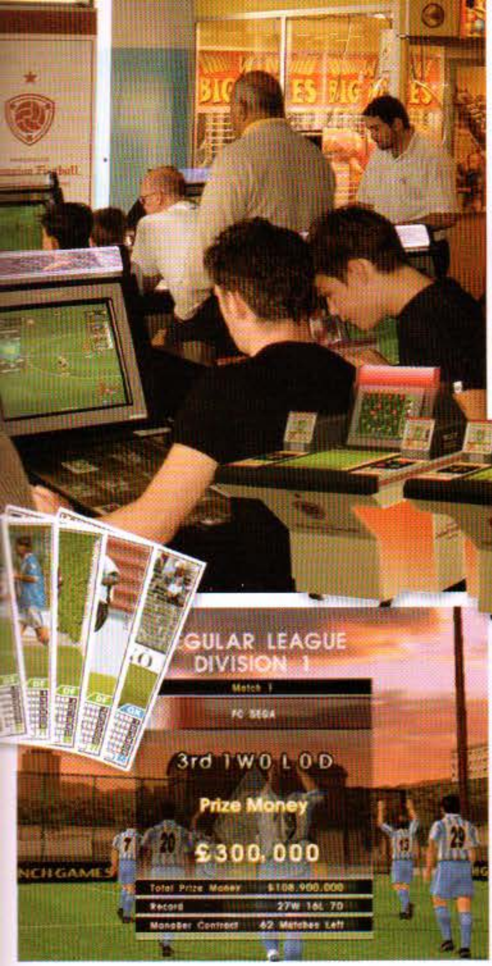
Duly equipped, players then insert their Club Card and £2 credit into one of the *WCCF* unit's consoles and begin a one-off setting-up process – picking a team name, kit colour and so forth. But that's where the bog-standard football game features come to an abrupt end. Line-ups and formations are not selected from onscreen menus but determined by which cards the player puts on the 'pitch' (which sits table-like, at 90 degrees to the monitor) and precisely where he places them. A camera hidden beneath that pitch reads the Player Cards and almost instantly converts player IDs and positions into digital doppelgangers on the screen. Move a card during the game and that player's on-pitch placement and tactical approach is adjusted accordingly.

There are old-fashioned controls, too, but – perfectly reasonably given that the emphasis of *WCCF* is very much on management – they're remarkably (perhaps deliberately) old-fashioned, especially when set against the title's beguiling innovations in player input. The four directional buttons whose primary function is inter-match menu navigation double as rudimentary tools for tactical tweaking. While a 'pressure' button in the centre encourages more aggressive endeavour towards retrieval of the ball, it is at the cost of an accelerated decline in stamina.

Shoot and save buttons also enable managers to get involved in the action proper but only as a kind of prodding process at either end of the pitch. These buttons – all illumination, hard plastic and straight lines – recall nothing so much as the interface of the average pub fruit machine. Yet,



Having summoned underperforming footballers to the manager's office, players must decide what kind of talking-to will get them back on form: hairdryer-and-brimstone? Fatherly and supportive?







The standard fourplayer WCCF setup (top right) is a monster, but some units are even bigger (top left), with up to 16 consoles in addition to the screen

despite this fusion of non-specialist controls and mass-appealing, man-on-street content, *WCCF* won't be replacing the one-armed bandit in your local any time soon. The fourplayer unit (this is the standard, although a twoplayer plasma screen version is available and there are units for up to 16 players in Japan) makes indulgent use of six Naomi 2 boards: one for each player's console and two for the grand exhibition screen that flashes TV-style team, match and other data while screening highlights from games past and present. And the hefty overheads don't stop at the hardware. Every *WCCF* card features a fully licensed player from one of 14 leading European leagues – the UK Premiership's representatives are Arsenal, Chelsea, Liverpool and Man Utd. All of those cards – bedecked back and front with a mix of useless trivia and useful indicators of strengths and weaknesses – are produced especially for the game by Panini. The legendary Italian sticker company's collaboration is an instant guarantor of authenticity, a brilliant incitement to collect for collecting's sake and an inspired shortcut to mainlining prospective punters' most cherished childhood memories. However, as Sega Amusements Europe's special project manager Justin Burke indicates (despite sharing nothing more financially specific than a pained expression), this doesn't come cheap.

Is this card system, with its potential appeal for an entire generation of *Championship Managing* Britons, Sega Europe's great hope for generating Euro-enthusiasm for the spirit – if not the science or the scale – of Japan's networked arcades? Not particularly, Burke says – *Ghost Squad*, *Initial D*, *Virtua Striker 3* and others have already seen card systems prove their worth in the region. Is it a key component in Sega's new focus on Europe, like *Total War* or *Hellgate London*? Not quite, either: *WCCF* is merely the latest iteration of a game that started life in Japan in 2002 and has thrived there ever since. And one which, for all its grand branded content, bears the loveable quirks typical to Sega titles of similar provenance. Our starter pack included Arsenal defender Kolo Touré, whose specialist skill is listed as 'Speed Star's Foe' (and *WCCF* is hardly a title you can imagine the creatives at EA high-fiving over either).

Finally, a word on the graphics. That the visual dimension can remain unmentioned until the final paragraph of a discussion of a new Sega arcade showpiece is an indicator of just how out of the ordinary *WCCF* is. Its actual games are barely more aesthetically distinguished (though better animated) than those of the Dreamcast incarnation of *Sega WordWide Soccer*: functional and clear but utterly free of flash. Still, the upper-case player names that permanently accompany the avatars onscreen would have done for anything fancier. And, given that the game is aimed at a demographic whose members are still happy to spend Saturday afternoons watching Ceefax in-vision score updates on state-of-the-art TVs, probably won't affect the game's fate either way.

Is the world ready for a hybrid of *Champ Man*, *Project Rub* and *Pokémon*, or will *WCCF* prove the most ingenious and extravagant coin-operated white elephant of the 21st century? Who knows. It's football, as they say. Anything could happen and anything probably will.



Rub you the right way

Stroking those famous egos may win you the match

Until now, the inducement of contentment by repetitive strokes of the index finger has been something more commonly associated with the theories of Dr Alex Comfort than those of 'Professor' Arsene Wenger, but here, as elsewhere, *World Club Champion Football* makes a bold break with convention. In addition to stamina meters, *WCCF* players have morale ratings. Left unattended, players who are down will underperform. The solution? Call them into your office in the (timed) inter-match management sections by rubbing their cards with your fingers, then decide whether to chaste or charm them by choosing from three possible approaches, depending on the age and sensibility of the upset individual. It's your call.

OUT THERE



VOTE YOUR GAME

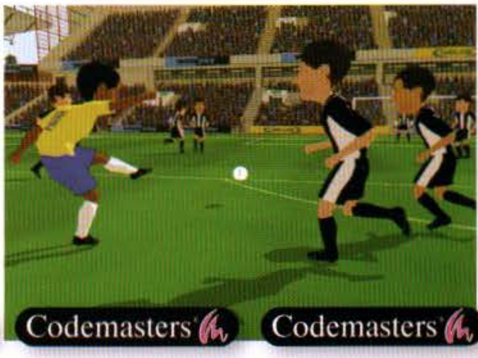
Fighting back against an increasing number of anti-violent-gaming laws cropping up across the United States, the Electronic Software Association has established www.videogamevoters.org, a grassroots campaign to educate Americans on the legislation in their area and how they can combat it in the future.

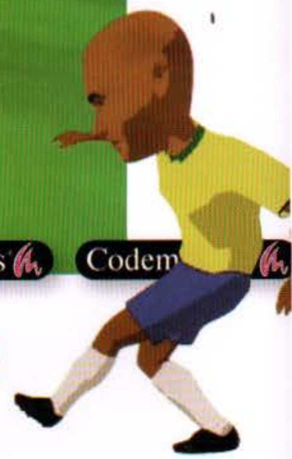
In an open letter, designer Will Wright laid out the need for such a body, adding: 'If videogame sales to minors are regulated based upon their content, as some politicians propose, the end result could be diluted and duller storylines as many game publishers will not be able to take the same risks that lead to great, innovative movies, books, and music'.



● www.videogamevoters.org







Restart making sense

The man behind 16bit crowd favourite Sensible Soccer brings both the game and us up to date



Hare: "My main reaction when *FIFA* took our crown was that it was so bloody slow. That slowness comes from animation-driven engines. The way *Pro Evolution Soccer* interpolates and interrupts animations is very sophisticated – it's better at doing that part than *FIFA* is – but we're even faster"

Together with Bitmap Brothers Mike Montgomery and John Phillips, Sensible Software co-founder **Jon Hare** (left) has found success in mobile phone development with Tower Studios, bringing to handsets the likes of *Cannon Fodder* and *Sensible Soccer*. But this season he's bringing the latter game to different turfs – those of *PES*-dominated consoles. Here, he tells us how.

Was the decision to redevelop *Sensible Soccer* spurred by a perceived lull in the evolution of titles such as *Winning Eleven/ Pro Evo* and *FIFA*?

It's quite clear that *Pro Evolution* is the best soccer game on the market and has been for a long time. But you can become a victim of your own success, unable to really change your formula because you're alienating existing users, and *PES* has found itself in the situation we were in ten years ago. People are naturally looking for new stuff, and what's interesting with *Sensible Soccer* is that something so old can seem so fresh.



"PES has found itself in the situation we were in 10 years ago. What's interesting with Sensible Soccer is that something so old can seem so fresh"

Between TV broadcasts and firsthand experience, do publishers today have a conflicting idea of what reality actually means?

People have definitely got a conflicting idea of what *simulation* means. Marketing-led publishing decisions demand a very televisual look. In order to emulate that and make it look realistic, the frequency of decision-making in terms of pad input has to be slowed down. *Sensi* might look like something frenetic, but it's more about what happens when you receive the ball and have three people bearing down on you and you can't just press the trick button.



Did modern controllers strike you as an opportunity or an obstacle?

Let's assume the speed of the machine is handled by the technical guys; as a game designer it's the peripheral that's most important. People have got used to holding the controller a certain way with *FIFA* and *PES* and we're basically just emulating that. In terms of how *Sensible* used to handle, it's more like the Mega Drive version – you can control the whole game using only two buttons, but where other games have come up with good ideas, we've been happy to copy them.

Regarding mobile phone gaming, how do you find working in a sector that seems entirely dominated by licensing?

Mobile offers an opportunity to develop relatively cheaply at the bedroom-programmer standard to which we're accustomed, but technically it's a nightmare. You've got 150 handsets to support, with two thirds of the budgets going just on conversion. Combine that with licensing and you can see that it doesn't encourage creativity *at all*. I hope the market settles down to a point where the operators aren't all fighting with each other and there aren't so many technical problems. To be honest, the American system is better.

There's an impression among many that mobile is a viable avenue into small-scale development and getting known.

No one wants new ideas – they want a background. I'm lying: if you do them for absolutely nothing then people will *take* them from you but that's not a way to promote yourself. If you're at home with your parents with some time, a flair for games and not a care for making money, then it's a good way in. The web-based PC games market is a better model. You need less technical backup and there are companies that can distribute the stuff. As a developer, you want to create the original *IP* cheaper and, if it sticks, hold on to the rights and get it on other formats. Getting that seed to germinate won't make you a huge amount of money but it'll make someone believe in you.



Sights such as this (and the view beyond it – below right) demonstrate that Nintendo is once more in control in Japan – at least in the handheld market



HARDWARE

Lite fantastic in Japan

Expectations are blown away as Nintendo's revamped DS hardware proves to be a must-have for gamers of all ages

Sony's mastery of communications and marketing may mean that its launches tend to eclipse those of the competition, but when it comes to relaunches and revisions there are few that can hold a candle to Nintendo. The fervour of March's Japanese DS Lite launch suggests that despite the region's love of converging technologies, its handheld market has swung quickly back in favour of a pure (for the moment) gaming machine. A primarily cosmetic upgrade, Lite has proven that consumers are fast neglecting Sony's cool hardware ambitions for the more inventive spirit outlined at this year's latest DS Conference. At a glance, March 2 was the original PSP launch restaged, with queues forming a day early thanks to anticipated shortages. It was no secret that Nintendo would have few Lites ready and that its promise of a January solution to manufacturing difficulties would go unfulfilled. Like PSP, there would be only one Lite per customer, with no preorder opportunities. Though shipments had been rerouted via air as opposed to sea, only the white-hued model of the machine was available during the first week. Queues of up to 600 people saw doors open at 9am and within half an hour all DS Lite stocks were gone.

Chinese buyers, a familiar sight at the PSP launch, were again out in force, and, employing a tried-and-tested tactic – paying the homeless to harvest as many single units as possible – accounted for ten to 15 percent of the day's total sales. So-called blind resell locations (those that see very few customers for newly launched machines) such as Shibuya and Yurakucho also enjoyed an unexpectedly brisk trade, later characterising the phenomenon as an illustration of the 'DS factor'. Indeed, the Lite's targeting of those adults believed to have held off from adopting its chunky forebear has surpassed its goal.

Popularity begets further popularity and by the March 11 release of Lites black and blue, the 'touch generation' was already common parlance. Queues were 200-strong by 4am, many stores declaring themselves sold out a mere two hours later, while a tellingly broad age-range of planned adopters scoured Tokyo stores by taxis, many of whose drivers resourcefully used radios to establish which retailers in the city still had available stock.

A total of 160,000 DS Lites had been sold in all, twice the number of PSPs shifted during the same launch period. On top of that, 100,000 original DS units were also sold. Nintendo promised 450,000 DS Lites and 200,000 of its predecessor for availability throughout March but even this, stores claimed, would be insufficient in meeting such storming demand.



The changing face of Japan's gaming market, as ushered in by *Brain Training* and its publisher's new philosophy



Faced with the prospect of inadequate stock levels, stores such as the now famous Tsutaya store in Shibuya – used by Sony for its PSP launch – simply gave up trying

Newswire



Halo tops the Live list

March's update of the Xbox Live most-played list had some unexpected results. *Halo 2*'s continued dominance most likely has 360 hardware shortages to thank. Live awareness of all 360 titles means that even singleplayer sessions are included, so the list actually offers a very skewed look at players' online habits. *Call Of Duty 2* ranked second despite its multiplayer, *Fight Night: Round 3* came third, while *Perfect Dark Zero* and *DOA4* were placed fourth and fifth. A surprising inclusion was the Live Marketplace *demo* of *The Outfit* in eighth place.



INTERVIEW



The morality of Monkey Ball

When Sega signed Traveller's Tales to make Super Monkey Ball Adventure, it had some strange stipulations...

The world of *Super Monkey Ball* is surreal enough – and the task of twisting it into a free-roaming platform adventure awkward enough – without trying to imagine AiAi as a wedding planner. But that's just what Sega asked Traveller's Tales' Oxford studio, previously responsible for *Crash Twinsanity*, to do – adding in some philosophical musing on what ails monkey society for good measure. The game's lead designer, **Paul Gardner**, explains.

Did the concept of taking a pure, simple arcade game and expanding it into an action adventure worry you at all?

"The brief we were sent by Sega in terms of narrative was quite challenging because they wanted a game that wasn't so black-and-white in terms of villains and heroes"

We were quite apprehensive about that part of it, because *Monkey Ball's* a game of contrasts. You've got juxtaposed elements: really cute characters, but a very pure game mechanic that's quite challenging. It's seen as a children's game but it's not really at a level that's necessarily playable by the age group that you imagine it's for. The fanbase for the game is made up of quite pure gameplayers. But I think we were reassured by the fact that Sega wasn't trying to remove that part of the game, that it was something that would run in parallel to it and could still be played in that way.

But how do you go about adding a story to a game that's so abstract and nonsensical in the first instance?

As I understand it, Mr Nagoshi [Sega's Toshihiro Nagoshi, creator of the *Monkey Ball* series] had a whole backstory worked out that was never told in the games and that's what we're using. It's pretty surreal. But one aspect of this genre of game that I really enjoy is the narrative one. The brief we were set by Sega in terms of the narrative was quite challenging because they wanted a game that wasn't so black-and-white in terms of villains and heroes. They wanted something in which the conflicts were coming from misunderstanding or ignorance or fear of the unfamiliar. It was quite challenging translating that into gameplay because ultimately there has to be some tension to drive the game forward.

The concept of the wedding [between the escaped, star-crossed lovers from rival kingdoms, Princess DeeDee and Prince AbeAbe] was something that came directly from the brief. It was about more than just organising it, though. We also tried to set the scenario up in such a way that there was still some suspense.

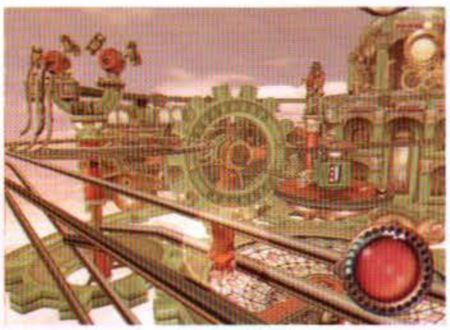
It's often a problem with this style of the game that you don't know why you're running errands for every NPC, or why you're stomping anything that moves.

Later on in the game there are ways in which the whole thing is questioned – the going and helping people just because that's what they're asking you to do. We question that immediate trust in the characters, whether it's warranted. As for enemies, we don't have many. It was a conscious decision, so that the game wasn't just about resolving a problem by crushing something. The Naysayer creatures that we did introduce were a way of setting up some direct conflict, some manifestation of the thing you're trying to overcome, but they're not the cause of the problem, they're a symptom of it. They're a physical representation of the sorrow of the monkeys.

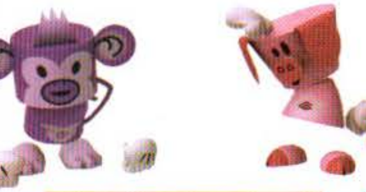
Traveller's Tales has a lot of experience developing games for children, which is quite a neglected area nowadays – how do you design a game that a young child can enjoy?

A game that targets young children should be quite forgiving in terms of giving them time to explore. From playtests that we've done, we've found that younger players are happy just to spend some time in the environment interacting with characters to see what they do. Maybe they don't even get past the first stage of the game! Also, having clear and simple input is something that's really important. We also try to ensure that there's some kind of engaging logic to the game so that there's always a rationale for why the player is doing something, or why something is there. It's really easy to lose the core thing that makes a property what it is. Having learned that with *Crash*, the first thing we did with *Monkey Ball* was look at the previous games and to see what we could draw from them. We never had to refer outside of the games in terms of storyline or humour in the gameplay; these are all things that came logically from the characters.





Once it felt Traveller's Tales had earned its trust, Sega was happy to give the company free rein in creating *Super Monkey Ball Adventures'* rich cast of characters. It preferred to see what the licensee came up with and only very rarely requested changes





EVENT

Dare To Be Digital deadline looms





Professor Fribble's Fun Factory (above) by Switched On Entertainment and *Primary Steps* by The Frozen North (top) are two confidently designed edutainment titles that garnered plaudits at previous Dare To Be Digital events. The contest likes to accommodate those genres that amateur developers will find the most accessible

Scotland's prestigious development contest welcomes its widest range of competitors

With its application deadline coming hot on the heels of GDC, this year's Dare To Be Digital competition offers one answer to the ever-popular yet troublesome question: 'How do I make a name in videogame development?' Initially open to students at Scotland's universities and colleges of art, the event is this year accepting additional entries from Northern Ireland, China, Hong Kong and Canada's Algoma University College. Staged at Dundee's Abertay University for a period of ten weeks, it encourages teams of five to spend that time developing a prototype videogame, aided throughout by assorted industry specialists and supporters such as EA.

Since its inauguration in 2000, the event has typically favoured inventive IP over those of traditional genres, proving especially open to Flash and edutainment titles. Notable entrants include last year's *Conspiracy – Corporate Warfare* by Glasgow-based Evil Machines, by-the-artist-and-for-the-artist graffiti title *City Scrawlaz* from 2004, and thirdperson RPG *Demon Lore* from 2003. The prizes for this year have yet to be announced, though the event prides itself on the interest it draws from within the industry. The closing date for Scottish and Northern Irish applications is April 17, though Canadians have until April 30. Interviews will take place at the beginning of May, with the event itself starting on June 12 and judged on August 17. Further details are available at www.daretobedigital.com

Continue

Digital distribution
Microsoft leads, everyone follows. How about that?

Nintendo's DS
It'll be a better world when everyone has one

Dinner jackets
Brits know how to collect an award. And swear

Quit

3am finishes at GDC
Every year you say it won't happen. You are wrong

Games Power 50
Oblivion? No, you want to play Grass Cutter

Too much media
So much gaming stuff. So much of it truly dismal

Author: Joe Abercrombie
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07785 9



THE BLADE ITSELF

Marketed as the next big thing in contemporary fantasy, The Blade Itself offers many honed edges

Tolkien-esque fantasy has always been a difficult subject to tackle for the seriously minded writer. Comparisons with the great man himself can't be taken lightly; clearly there's no way you can provide the same depth of backstory. Equally, there's also the need to distance yourself from the continual glut of cheap hack-and-dash efforts churned out by the likes of David Gemmell. But slowly picking his way through those archetypal dead marshes comes Joe Abercrombie. His debut, The Blade Itself, is being heavily marketed as a breakout book in much the same way as Gollancz managed with sci-fi author Richard Morgan. And like Morgan's Altered Carbon series, The Blade Itself is a page-turner powered by a combination of gritty, fast-paced action and juicy doses of cynicism. Perhaps more remarkable, however, is the way in which Abercrombie sets the scene. As the opening book in a series there are lot of introductions to be made as main characters – ageing warrior Ninefingers; grumpy wizard Bayaz; twisted inquisitor Glokta; dandy soldier Jezal dan Luthar, plus a couple more – are deftly brought into play. Old rivalries are hinted at, while new connections between unlikely colleagues are made. Underlying it all is the usual idea of a civilisation in decline suddenly trying to deal with the rise of various murderous enemies at its borders. Still, the variation of protagonists – there are no heroes here yet – suggests the opportunity for surprise as future books add extra layers and interactions.

Author: TL Taylor
Publisher: MIT Press
ISBN: 9 780262 201636



PLAY BETWEEN WORLDS

Academic explorations into the real-world implications of time spent with EverQuest come up short on answers

If a warning is required for any academics attempting to make sense of the online worlds that millions of people now inhabit, this book is it. A longterm denizen of *EverQuest*, TL Taylor's day job is as an assistant professor researching online lifestyles. The crunch between her two roles, however, is found in the book's subtitle, Exploring Online Game Culture. And like a pirate with a stolen treasure map, plenty of exploration is certainly evident. There's even some online gaming culture, too. The problem is the lack of answers to the phalanx of question marks that march across these pages. Of course, to some degree, part of the academic's task is to define the problem by referring to all preceding information on the subject and, for students keen to track down a comprehensive reading list, the reference and notation sections will throw up a rich vein of research material. But in terms of gaining focus on why the blurry line between online gaming life and real life is so interesting, you won't find much definition. Partly, this is due to the fact that, ten years on, she still manages to remain continually amazed that virtual life can have an impact on real life, and vice versa. In many ways it's the flipside to the Daily Mail's 'Ban This Sick Filth' rubber stamp and all the more reprehensible for its cultural inversion. Frankly, ending with the conclusion '*EverQuest* is something more than what we typically think when we call it "just a game"' really doesn't cut it in 2006.

God Of War II

FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** SCEA



Standing its ground on PS2 to ensure that it meets an anticipated visual bar, Santa Monica's sequel has been denied one minute, paraded the next. But will Jaffe find time to lend a guiding hand?

Point Blank

FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



DuckShoot? DeadlySniper? DigitalSuperstar? The potential titles for yet another guaranteed DS hit which, for the moment, goes simply by its original name. The entire arcade series will feature

Midway Xbox Live Arcade Titles

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** MIDWAY



Not the bespoke development we were waiting for, but a new batch of coin-op ports. *Defender*, *Paperboy*, *Root Beer Tapper*, *Cyberball* and *Ultimate Mortal Kombat 3* get the online treatment

Rainbow Six: Vegas

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



Another round of optimistic target footage from Ubi at E3 2006, anyone? Using the no-nonsense approach of *GR:AW* as a spiritual template, Montreal is gambling (again) with the series' integrity

Sengoku Musou BB

FORMAT: PC, PS3 (TBC) **PUBLISHER:** KOEI



The lacklustre 360 update of *Dynasty Warriors 5* suggested that attention lay elsewhere – perhaps it was in this slash-heavy MMORPG. Details are sketchy, but at least it's looking the part

Battlefield 2142

FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** EA



EA may finally have both of its hands on DICE, but it appears the Swedish developer hasn't quite got its head around the idea of futurism. As great as *BF2* can look, it's in for a *Quake* at Christmas

Brothers In Arms 3

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (TBC) **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



The new lead character and backwardly referential story mightn't stir shellshocked genre veterans, but the Gearbox-designed UE3 visuals and rumoured new camera system at least warrant note

Starcraft: Ghost

FORMAT: TBA **PUBLISHER:** BLIZZARD



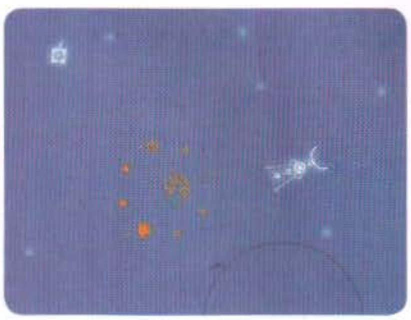
Confirmed this month as being under indefinite review, Blizzard's beleaguered actioner appears here by virtue of **Edge** not having an Outgoing page. A shift in focus to current-gen is being blamed

Over G Fighters

FORMAT: 360 **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT



You'll have to forgive our scepticism when attempting to match what we've seen so far to the claims of unparalleled authenticity and intense combat. Taito's title could do with some visual thrust



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Flow

intihuatani.usc.edu/cloud/flowing/

For his PhD thesis, Jenova Chen, creator of last year's daydream simulator *Cloud* (Internet Game of the Month in **E**157) set out to tackle the gaming implications of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow', the all-encompassing, time-warping, fully focused state of mind we might now more simply refer to as 'the zone.'

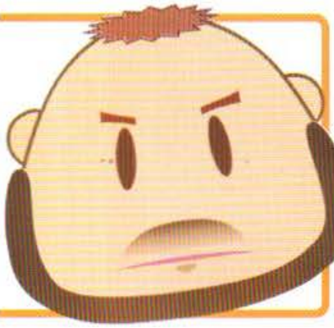
Taking functional, visual and audio cues from existing commercial works like *Electroplankton*, *Cubivore* and the initial stages of *Spore* – the latter so much so that Will Wright indirectly thanked Chen in his GDC keynote for creating an unofficial prototype – the resulting demo exhibits all the same quieting and absorbing aspects of its inspirations.

Its intuitive one-click play involves guiding a sinewy microbe through layered watery depths, splitting and eating similar cellular life to modify your own shape (which has already spawned a community of spindly chained show-offs), and, it must be said, effectively manages to captivate in a way that would do Csikszentmihalyi proud.



Pinball and popularity polls

Game producer Brick Bardo chews over The Who and Japan's gaming favourites



Today, I went to see a musical – The Who's Tommy. As you may know, it's about a handicapped boy who can't see, speak or hear, but he discovers pinball and, through it, finds a new kind of inspiration inside him. I'm not a big fan of The Who but I have to admit that Pinball Wizard is a really cool song, and afterwards I felt so excited by the musical that I also watched the movie on DVD. Thinking about Tommy, I realised that if this musical was created today, he would not find himself in a pinball game but in a videogame.

A few days ago I watched a TV show featuring an American supergamer. His name is Brice Mellen – he's blind but an amazing fighting game player, and he recently faced 25 Japanese gamers, playing *Mortal Kombat Deception*. This game hasn't been released in Japan, so the Japanese players obviously didn't know its combos and so on, but Brice's performance was nevertheless incredible, recording 25 victories, with 22 defeats. He achieves this kind of performance by being capable of understanding what is happening on the screen from only the game's audio. But that does not make him Tommy.

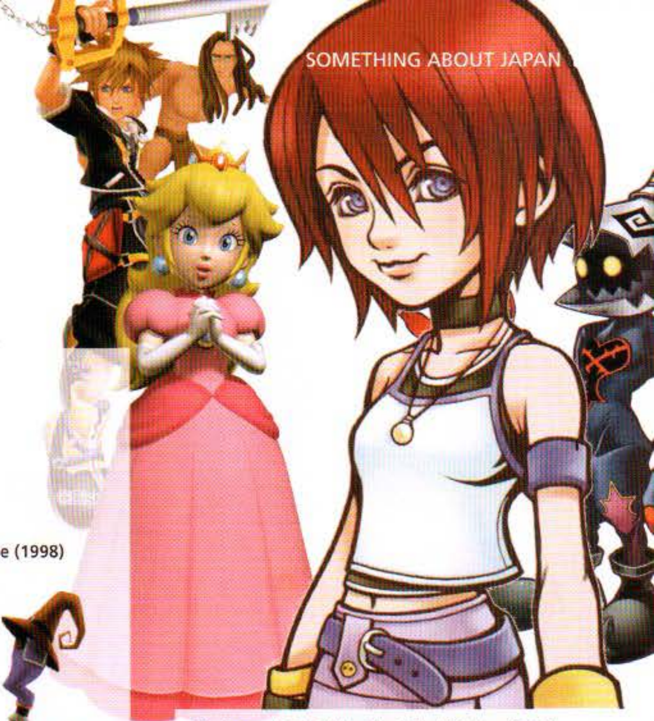
Handling a PS2 controller or an arcade joystick, it's hard to see how such a hero could overcome challenges the way Tommy does. In pinball you are at one with the game, controlling the flippers in various way to pull off some very special techniques. Whether you're a charismatic supergamer or not, videogames are only about the actions that take place on the screen. It would be difficult to make a musical or a movie focused on that, even though it works with pinball. Maybe this will change in the future.

OK, now I want to completely change topics, and look at a feature that was recently run in Famitsu's 900th issue. It featured the top 100 best games of all time, as voted by its readers. So, what about it? Well, while many people outside of Japan would be surprised by the games that appear, most of the rankings look quite normal to us. But there are still a few things that are surprising even from a Japanese point of view, which we'll get to.

Japanese really love RPGs, but I can't help asking questions about the fact that 50 per cent of the top 100 consists of this genre, and that half are by Square-Enix. Meanwhile, you find almost no titles from Nintendo or Sony

In this top 100, unsurprisingly, there are very few foreign games, even if they performed well overseas. Let's see, *Wizardry* is 66th, *GTA: Vice City* 76th, *SimCity* 93rd and *Tetris* 96th. And not a single firstperson shooter on the list. Maybe outside of Japan people would think this very strange but here, users wouldn't be at all surprised. I've previously talked about how Japanese gamers don't care much, if at all, about overseas games, whatever their fame outside Japan. With 300,000 copies sold in Japan, *GTA III* is almost a miracle; normally, 10,000 to 20,000 copies would be an incredible success for a foreign game in Japan, and





The top 100 in full

1. Final Fantasy X (2001)
2. Final Fantasy VII (1997)
3. Dragon Quest III (1988)
4. Dragon Quest VIII (2004)
5. Machi (1998)
6. Final Fantasy IV (1991)
7. Tactics Ogre (1995)
8. Final Fantasy III (1990)
9. Dragon Quest VII (2000)
10. Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time (1998)
11. Dragon Quest V (1992)
12. Far East Of Eden 2 (1992)
13. Sakura Taisen (1996)
14. Dragon Quest IV (1990)
15. Final Fantasy V (1992)
16. Xenogears (1998)
17. Dragon Quest II (1987)
18. Sakura Taisen III (2002)
19. Kingdom Hearts (2002)
20. Street Fighter II (1992)
21. Super Mario Bros (1985)
22. Final Fantasy VIII (1999)
23. Toki Meki Memorial (1995)
24. Final Fantasy IX (2000)
25. Final Fantasy VI (1994)
26. Metal Gear Solid 3 (2004)
27. Valkyrie Profile (1999)
28. Chrono Trigger (1995)
29. Kingdom Hearts II (2005)
30. Dragon Quest (1986)
31. Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past (1991)
32. Final Fantasy X-2 (2003)
33. Resident Evil (1996)
34. Dragon Quest VI (1995)
35. F-Zero (1990)
36. Sakura Taisen II (1998)
37. Mother 2 (1994)
38. Mother (1989)
39. Virtua Fighter (1994)
40. Dragon Quest V (PS2 remake) (2004)
41. Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker (2002)
42. Metal Gear Solid 2 (2001)
43. Animal Crossing (DS) 2005
44. Tales Of The Abyss (2005)
45. Ogre Battle (1993)
46. Legend Of Zelda (1986)
47. Virtua Fighter 2 (1995)
48. Mysterious Dungeon 2 (1995)
49. Sonic The Hedgehog (1991)
50. Metal Gear Solid (1998)
51. Pokemon Red/Green (1996)
52. Y's 1 & 2 (1989)
53. Romancing Saga (1992)
54. Toki Meki Memorial (PC Engine) (1994)
55. Super Robot Taisen Alpha (2000)
56. Resident Evil 2 (1998)
57. Tales of Eternia (2000)
58. Digital Devil Story Megami Tensei II (1990)
59. Shin Megami Tensei (1992)
60. Final Fantasy II (1988)
61. Super Mario World (1990)
62. To Heart II (2004)
63. Final Fantasy (1987)
64. Puyo Puyo (1992)
65. Family Stadium Pro Baseball (1986)
66. Wizardry (1987)
67. Hokkaido Murder Mystery (1987)
68. Fire Emblem (1994)
69. Super Mario Kart (1992)
70. Dynasty Warriors 4 (2003)
71. Monster Hunter (2004)
72. Best Play Pro Baseball (1988)
73. Grandia (1997)
74. Resident Evil 4 (GC) 2005
75. Gran Turismo 4 (2004)
76. GTA: Vice City (2004)
77. Super Monaco GP (1990)
78. Torneko Mysterious Dungeon (1993)
79. Tales Of Destiny (1997)
80. Street Fighter 2 Turbo (1993)
81. Dynasty Warriors III (2001)
82. Final Fight (1990)
83. Monster Hunter Portable (2005)
84. Final Fantasy Tactics (1997)
85. Monster Hunter G (2005)
86. Mysterious Dungeon 2 (2000)
87. Kung Fu (1985)
88. Toki Meki Memorial (Saturn) (1996)
89. Tales Of Destiny II (2002)
90. Kamaitachi No Yoru (1994)
91. Sakura Taisen IV (2002)
92. Tales Of Rebirth (2004)
93. Sim City (1991)
94. Saga 2 (1990)
95. Pro Baseball Family Stadium 87
96. Tetris (Game Boy) (1989)
97. Secret Of Mana (1993)
98. Gradius (1986)
99. Super Mario Bros 3 (1988)
100. Resident Evil 4 (PS2) 2005



50,000 copies would be considered a mega hit. So, you can see there's no chance that an FPS would find a place in a top 100 list made by gamers. In Japan, people who actually play and love foreign games are seen as maniacs, gamers with very specialist tastes. That's me, then!

Now let's see of there's anything strange from a Japanese perspective. In the top ten, we find seven titles from Square-Enix; the number increases when you look at the first 50 titles, with 20 per cent published by Square-Enix, and 25 per cent in the total of the top 100. Well, everybody knows that *Final Fantasy* and *Dragon Quest* are the two most popular series in Japan, but I still feel uneasy about it, that because of the popularity of the brands they have to be so prevalent at the top of this chart. Japanese really love RPGs, but I can't help asking questions about the fact that 50 per cent of the list consists of this genre (straight RPGs, action RPGs, simulation RPGs, etc) and that half of these titles are made by Square-Enix. Meanwhile, you find almost no titles from Nintendo or Sony – Nintendo has only 12 in the list, mainly focused on Zelda and Mario, while Sony has just one.

Aside from the domination of RPGs we can also see lots of adventure (action adventures, girl sims, etc) and action games but very few sports or racing titles – even popular and famous names like *Winning Eleven, Powerful Proyakyu, Fire Pro Wrestling* and *Ridge Racer* are missing from the list. Hits like *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Parappa* are also absent. You could ask yourself if the list is actually the result of votes from real gamers.

Could it be down to the way the top 100 was compiled? Is there an influence from the magazine or even the game makers themselves? I can't say precisely, but I sense something else shaping the results we've seen. If, in one way or another, the results are being influenced by the magazine it would be a real concern. In a way, though, I would actually prefer it if outside influences had affected this top 100 – it would be of even more concern if this really represents users' opinions. After all, if this ranking is genuine, it would mean that we do not need to make any new types of game, that there's be no need for innovation and originality. And that would mean the end for the Japanese videogame industry.

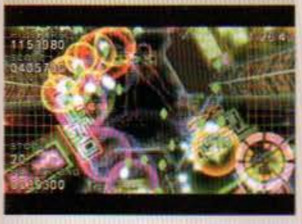


Hype

The future of electronic entertainment

Edge's most wanted

Every Extend Extra



What's the worst thing about *N3* being delayed? The knock-on effect suffered by *E3*, Mizuguchi's mobile update of our favourite suicidal shooter (or should we say blaster?).
PSP, BANDAI

Alone In The Dark: Near Death Investigation



If Atari succeeds in offloading Eden Studios, will it live to regret losing the architect of two potentially glorious comebacks? These series don't rescue themselves, you know.
360, ATARI

Sensible Soccer Live Arcade



Its creator claims to be interested in all potential platforms, yet to the best of our knowledge this version isn't even planned. Time to boot up *Advanced Mass Petition Simulator*.
XBOX LIVE ARCADE, CODEMASTERS

Easy riders

Don't curb your enthusiasm



Some of *Metroid Prime*'s more infamous bosses caused a number of fans to walk away and never get closure on Samus' 3D mostly-masterpiece. Was that, coupled with the return of some equally tiresome leviathans, the reason why the sequel wasn't as widely embraced?

We've all got the scars. They're in different places, but come from the same source: sticking points. Those moments in games where the difficulty curve develops an aggravating spike and sends you reeling, sometimes so much as to prevent you from ever returning to the game in question, whether it's one of a multitude of player-hating bosses, a disastrously balanced setpiece or some poor checkpoints.

If you've developed a phobia of such things, a game's 'easy' mode isn't a guaranteed safe place to be, either. Sure, certain portions of the game become cakewalks, but in many cases the threat of an end-of-level migraine never quite vanishes.

Easy mode shouldn't just be a low-fat normal mode. When you choose it, you're making a statement: 'Maximum boom and minimal gloom, please'. Why won't games take this extreme difficulty lowering to its actual extreme?

The 'Easy, Normal, Hard' trinity is archaic. It's from an era when challenge and entertainment were harder to separate. Instead, offer this: 'What do you want from this game? Enjoyment, a challenge, or a mixture of both?' For those who choose the path of least resistance, let them have cheats, let them have infinite everything, let them be a true god instead of a partial one. For others, let them have their insane trials or more typical gaming fare.

Plenty of modern-day games could support this approach. Permanently accessible difficulty sliders are fair solutions for games like *Knights Of The Old Republic* and *Oblivion*. *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* – a powerhouse of battlefield noise and big-screen shimmer – doesn't even offer an easy mode, a straightforward romp, and thus alienates an audience with a taste for such things but no appetite for constant reloading at its sticking points. *Black* is immensely enjoyable with infinite grenades, a feature unlocked by completing the game on hard. Why is such a joy only available to nimble-fingered and hardheaded players?

We're in a development culture where the purse-string holders seem to be wailing and gnashing at every step – and willing to compromise the product – in order to widen a game's appeal. Would such an approach work? Or, more importantly, could it hurt to try?



28 **Final Fantasy XII**
PS2



30 **Broken Sword: The Angel Of Death**
PC



32 **Table Tennis**
360



34 **Super Monkey Ball Adventure**
GC, PS2, PSP

35 **Children Of Mana**
DS

36 **Scarface: The World Is Yours**
PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX



37 **Viva Piñata**
360

38 **Dungeons & Dragons Online**
PC

40 **LocoRoco**
PSP

40 **New Super Mario Bros**
DS

FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE-ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), NOVEMBER (US), TBA (UK)**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E132, E138, E159**

Final Fantasy XII

The curtain call's been a long time coming, but there's still no show like a Final Fantasy show





Models are invariably spectacular, with even incidental cast members given expressive, memorable character and costume design



Repeatedly killing enemy types from the same clan will generate a chain bonus, increasing the value of the items that are dropped when slain – and encouraging farming in true MMO style, while also making it less of a chore to do





There are many things to say about *FFXII*, but for those who would prefer to experience its wonder all-but-unspoiled, it can be limited to just one: yes. Whether your faith was placed in the development team's cult credentials, the *Final Fantasy* name, or a post-merger Square at last awakening from its sleepwalk through remakes and side-projects, it was worth the wait. The first dozen hours display an impossibly graceful balancing act, using the privileged position of a full-blown *FF* title to overhaul both the franchise and the JRPG genre. For all the anticipation (and trepidation) generated by the game's breaks from tradition, playing *FFXII* reveals it's remarkably faithful – choosing to rework, not abandon, pulling disparate elements from the series' progression into an experience as new as it is familiar.

It may have arrived late in the PS2's ongoing Indian summer of visual splendours – or early to the glitterball pixel sheen of the 360 age – but it seems *FFXII*'s art team worked every hour of the game's delays, such is its vibrancy and lavishness. Whether an intentional statement or simply a result of the hardware having nothing left to spare, this is an old-fashioned, illustrated beauty, owing everything to art design and texture work. Suffused with Mediterranean influence from glassy sky to underground bazaars, and thrumming with all the life its busy level-of-detail engine can handle, it succeeds in providing a massively multiplayer game's scale built just for one.

That peculiar MMO sensation of being the centre of the game's universe, yet utterly dwarfed by it, is most obvious when stepping outside a city's gates into the wilderness

That peculiar MMO sensation of being the centre of the game's universe, yet utterly dwarfed by it, is most obvious when stepping outside a city's gates into the wilderness – to find your party standing within that wilderness for as far as you can twist the camera. Though these areas visibly stretch to the horizon and often take hours to explore fully, they're sectioned into zones by loading breaks, allowing *Dragon Quest VIII*'s endlessly unfurling vistas to steal a little of their



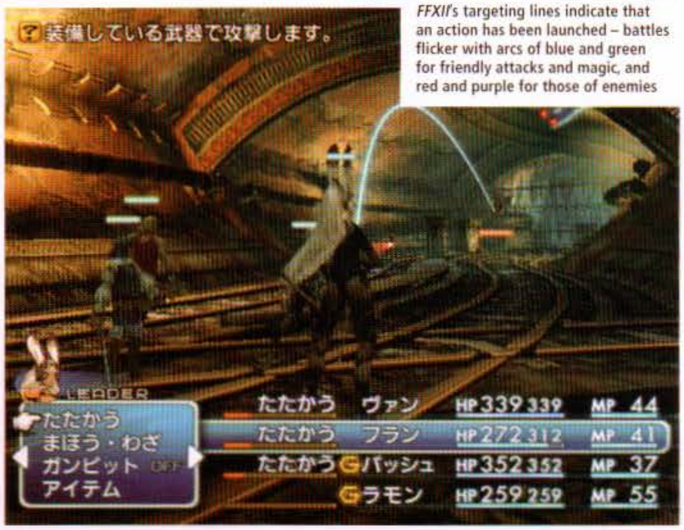
Ivalice's cities are grandiose, believably lived-in and dotted with chatty NPCs (indicated by an emoticon). Detail is packed on so thick that some shops prove to be more intricate than other games' entire towns











FFXII's targeting lines indicate that an action has been launched – battles flicker with arcs of blue and green for friendly attacks and magic, and red and purple for those of enemies



License to skill

An evolution of *FFX*'s Sphere Grid – a visual representation for branching character advancement – *FFXII*'s License Board contains the requirements for all the game's skills, spells and equipment. The entire party earns License Points for defeating enemies, which can be used to customise each character on their personal copy of the board. Earning a License reveals the adjacent Licenses for purchase, with sections of the board broadly corresponding to traditional *FF* classes – though there's no explicit benefit or penalty for being a specialist or generalist. The board also holds a scattering of the game's Summon Beasts and Mist super-attacks, which unlike other Licenses can only be assigned to one character.



thunder. But the balance is redressed by *FFXII*'s local wildlife – prowling, fighting among themselves and reacting with bemusement or aggression when disturbed by the player. Their presence, and the complete seamlessness of combat, makes travelling the gameworld a series of open-air dungeon adventures rather than a cupful of dice from which to rattle encounters.

By default, combat plays out in a comfortably familiar 'active turn-based' fashion, with realtime movement and countdown-bound actions, but freezing when the command menu is brought up. For the more MMO-inclined, battle speed can be increased and the pause removed, your support characters slightly breaking the MMO illusion by proving so perfectly focused under AI control. That control is subject to Gambits, a scripting system allowing you to assign each character a series of condition/action prompts. At their simplest, Gambits can automate tasks such as dispensing pre-battle buffs or post-battle healing – but at their most intricate, it's possible to set up interplaying battle strategies for the entire party and observe the results. Should that prove too hands-off, it's just as viable to disable Gambits and issue commands manually, or to flick between directed control and backup Gambits on the fly.

This freedom of choice within carefully defined systems appears to characterise much of the game, as *FFXII* begins releasing the constraints most JRPGs save until the endgame – if they release them at all – as soon as it's possible to survive without them. It's not freeform, but it is open-ended, allowing complete choice over which skills and weapons each character will develop, or to diverge from the storyline's building gravity to hunt rare monsters, fulfill sidequests and strike out into uncharted areas. A question remains over how the game's overall balance can cope with players leapfrogging the main questline's difficulty after the hours they've spent exploring side avenues – but learning and beating the system is no new introduction to *FF*.

For the game that reportedly broke its director, it's also the game most likely to break the barriers to accessibility that held back Yasumi Matsuno's previous titles. The complexity hasn't been dumbed down as much as thought out, and presented with a masterclass in interface design and game flow. But if you didn't come along for the numbers, then there's still ample evidence of everything you expect from a *Final Fantasy*: an operatic, sweeping telling of a hero's journey, studded with encounters from the passing to the world-shaking. And everything you don't expect: chocobos and moogles alongside bitter war and bloody betrayal, a storyline that tips its hat to Shakespeare and Star Wars: A New Hope with equal reverence, a game aware that its series' occasionally deserved scapegoating is the key to its reinvention.

What's so obviously five years of exhausting effort unfolds effortlessly – making that long wait an unfortunate, but ultimately irrelevant footnote. Although now that's clear, the further wait for the game's localisation can only feel completely unfair.

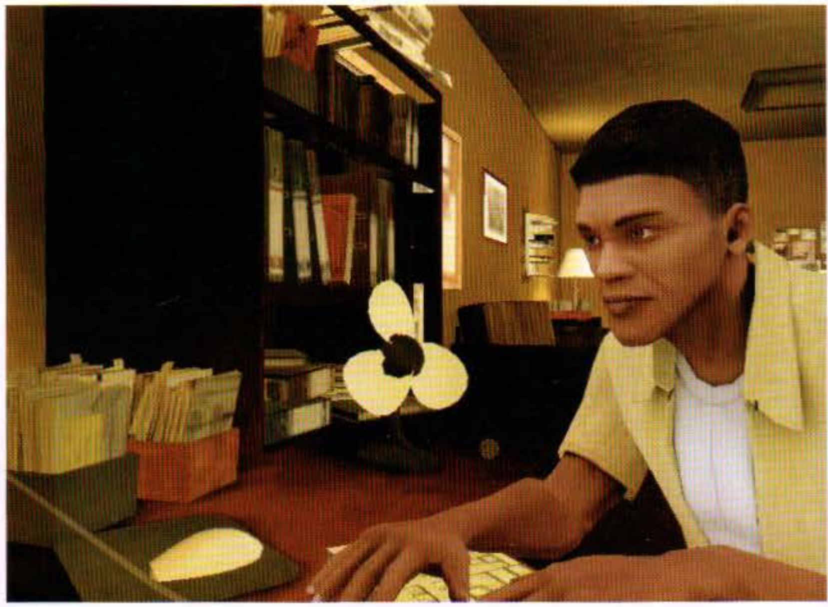






While in still screens the interface seems heavy-handed, it's far less obtrusive in play – thanks to both its slickness (actions are never more than three buttons away) and its placement letterboxing the visuals

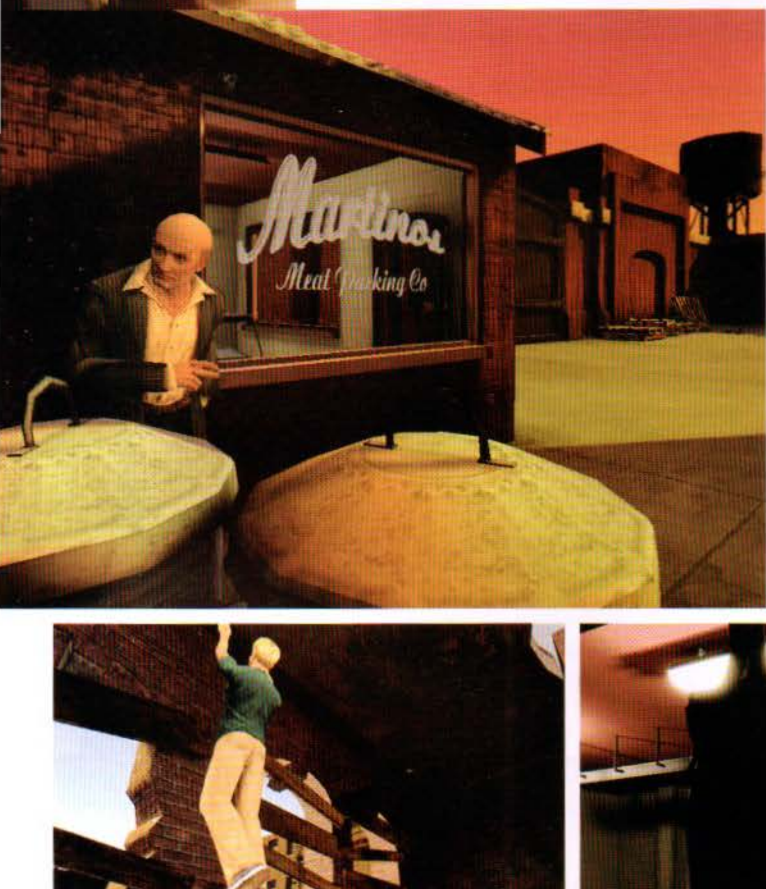




FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **REVOLUTION/SUMO DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Broken Sword: The Angel of Death

After the trilogy ended and the studio died, a new Broken Sword should seem out of place – but it never looked more comfortable



"There really was never an intention to do *Broken Sword 4*," says series creator **Charles Cecil** – in his mind, it had always been a trilogy. "We finished [the plot of] *Broken Sword 3* on an incredible high… where do you go from there? We really did it almost to close the door." His fans, though, refused to be shut out. *Broken Sword*'s followers "expected, almost demanded" a sequel and THQ was happy to join their chorus, since their loyalty has made the franchise a consistent, if unspectacular, seller. (How its production began after the closure of parent studio Revolution – with Cecil as creative director, managing work-for-hire at Sumo in Sheffield – was covered in detail in our interview with him last issue.)

So where do you go from there? To the other end of the spectrum, it seems, and a dramatic shift in the fortunes and romantic life of the globetrotting patent lawyer George Stobbart. What Cecil is prepared to reveal of *Angel Of Death*'s plot and early sequences suggests a game with a slightly earthier tone, although of course never straying far from the broad characterisation and high adventure that are *Broken Sword*'s hallmark. Following his fantastic triumph at the end of *The Sleeping Dragon*, George's return to reality has been painful: interrogated and disbelieved by the CIA, mistrusted and blacklisted by the law world, he finds himself working for a shabby bail bond company in an insalubrious corner of

George's return to reality has been painful: interrogated and disbelieved by the CIA, blacklisted by the law world, he finds himself working for a shabby bail bond company

New York. When a beautiful blonde Ukrainian by the name of Anna-Maria – who goes on to take Nico's place as George's adventuring companion love interest – appears in his office asking for help, he barely has time to demur before the pair are assaulted and pursued by a crew of cartoonish mafia goons operating out of a local salami factory.

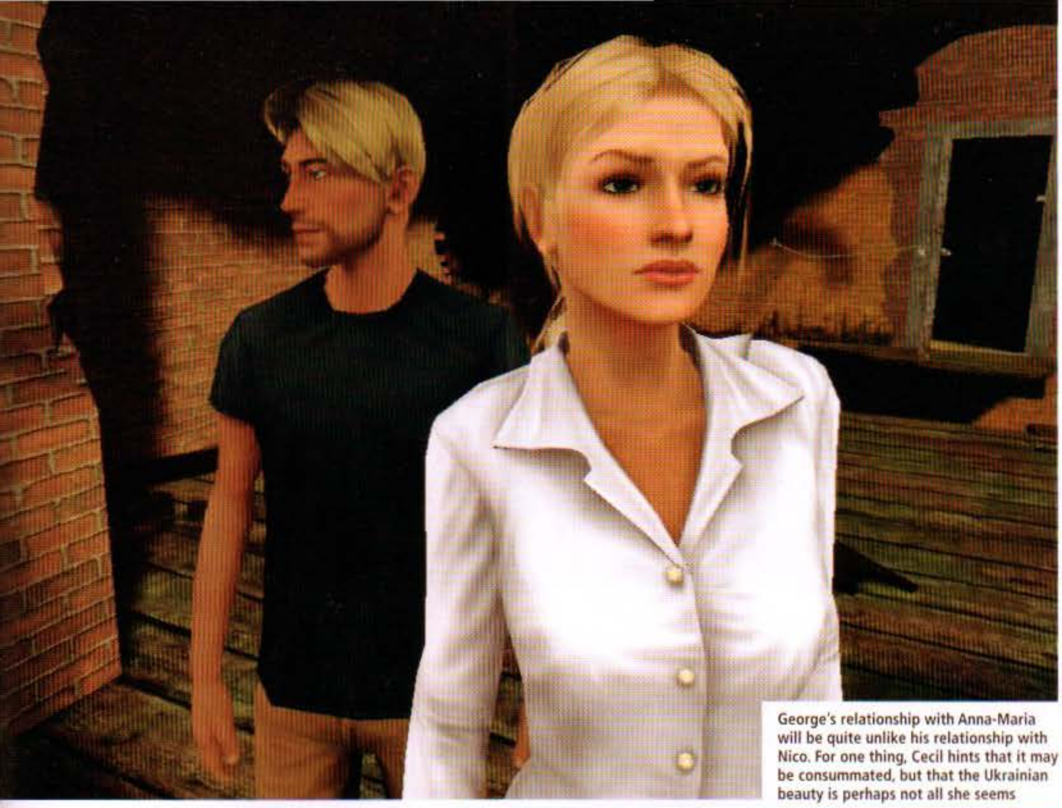
If that all sounds a bit too contemporary, rest assured that the mob is after Anna-Maria for a centuries-old manuscript – heavy on authentic medieval Latin and Templar symbolism – that has been in her family for generations, and that will lead the couple on a treasure hunt to Istanbul and beyond. This manuscript and others like it will be absolutely central to the game (much more



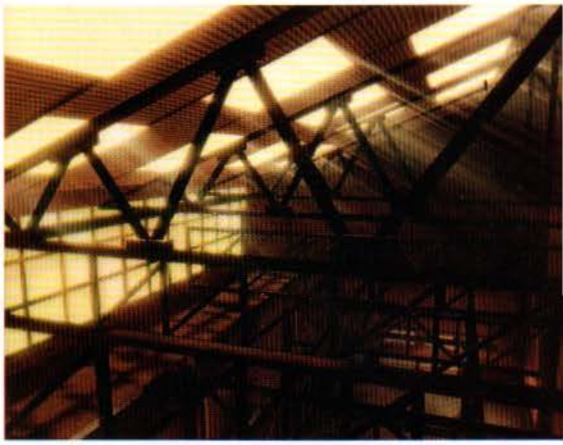
The early puzzles and assault-course sections we see are extremely conventional, down to a ledge-shuffling section that's a direct quote from the first *Broken Sword*, but they are not without sophistication. Make no mistake, this is definitely a game for adventure traditionalists



The usual Revolution flair for location is abundantly evident in the simultaneously sinister and comedic salami factory – a mafia front that George must infiltrate to retrieve Anna-Maria's manuscript. We look forward to the depiction of Istanbul



George's relationship with Anna-Maria will be quite unlike his relationship with Nico. For one thing, Cecil hints that it may be consummated, but that the Ukrainian beauty is perhaps not all she seems

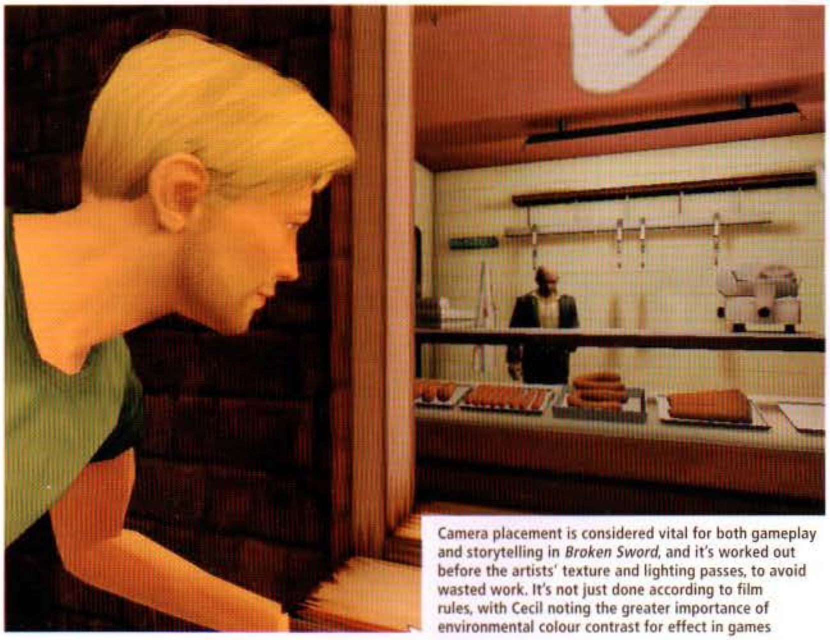


Despite initial scepticism from the Sumo team, Cecil is pushing through his concept of 'an emotional journey through colour'. The use of post-production colour filters as well as lighting effects to convey different moods in the same location will achieve this goal

so than in *The Sleeping Dragon*), and saturated in learned historical references and visual puzzles. The player can expect to return to and pore over them many times, cross-referencing them with the antiquarian database of George's rival André Lobineau. Leaning heavily on Cecil's own enthusiastic amateur medievalism, and backed up by sumptuous, scrupulously authentic artwork on the manuscripts themselves, this renewed focus on historical mystery can only be a smart move in these Da Vinci Code-obsessed times, as well as suiting the series' return to the PC as its primary home.

There aren't any conversions in the works yet, although Cecil firmly expects an eventual release on next-gen consoles. The concentration on PC has enabled a shift – after "very vigorous internal debate" – back to the mouse-centric control of classical adventuring, but Cecil tries to avoid referring to it as point-and-click, describing it as a hybrid scheme that has direct control options: the ability to actually click-and-drag George around the environment is an appealing compromise. It also obviously means a visual upgrade which, in the current build, seems to benefit the atmospheric, credible environments more than it does the expressive appeal of the characters.

In terms of design, Cecil is sticking to *The Sleeping Dragon*'s refined traditionalism, with most puzzles arising from the application of four 'verbs' to inventory objects. He politely dismisses the 'faux-adventure' model of recent genre darling *Fahrenheit*. "I think *Fahrenheit* was very interesting and very wonderful in many ways. But the moment you take an inventory away, I think you're taking an enormous amount of the armoury that designers have to actually make the game feel like it's a challenge rather than just simply pointing in the right direction and keeping going." Box puzzles return, too, despite the dismay that greeted the examples in *The Sleeping Dragon*. Cecil stoically defends their value and insists that his mistake was only to use them in inappropriate contexts, as pure, momentum-killing blocking mechanisms. But he does hope to create a greater sense of urgency in the game overall this time, with objectives that roll over every ten minutes.



Camera placement is considered vital for both gameplay and storytelling in *Broken Sword*, and it's worked out before the artists' texture and lighting passes, to avoid wasted work. It's not just done according to film rules, with Cecil noting the greater importance of environmental colour contrast for effect in games

There isn't the slightest indication, in anything we see of *The Angel Of Death*, that the demise of Revolution as a studio and a staff should give fans any cause for concern. Key members of past *Broken Sword* teams are present as freelancers and Sumo employees, and Sumo itself seems to be relishing the chance to build a sturdy next-generation engine and toolset around this game which, in turn, is liberating creative minds like Cecil's and the artists' from technical matters. The enthusiasm and depth with which Cecil discusses issues such as the writing style and colour contrasts he wants to employ is testament to that. It's true that returning *Broken Sword* to its PC roots and aiming it squarely at its established fanbase may not set the world alight and single-handedly 'save' the adventure genre. But it does look set to preserve, and even strengthen, the individual character of this one fine, much-loved example of it.



Tense moments

There's serious debate among the *Broken Sword* team at the moment over whether to retain the series' traditional past-tense narration or move it to the present tense. Cecil was prompted to think twice after being impressed by the immediacy and dynamism of the present-tense narration in Robert Rodriguez's Sin City. "You can convey a lot more... We could act as exposition, go into [George's] head to comment on things that he discovers as he discovers them, go into his head to hear him talking to himself about how he feels." He also feels it would give Rolf Saxon, the actor returning to voice George for the fourth time (after touring in the Jerry Springer opera), more to work with. The issue is far from decided, but it's plain to see which way Cecil is leaning.



Venues range from Salzburg to Shinjuku and encompass everything from garages to grand sports halls. The differences between tables and balls are pronounced, generally being slower in private practice areas



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR SAN DIEGO**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **MAY 26**

Table Tennis

Videogames' arch kings of cool set aside the blood and tears for some honest sweat in this straight-faced sports sim

The word that keeps coming up when you talk to Rockstar about *Table Tennis* is 'focused'. Focused in its playing style, the intention being to create a sports title with the rapid exchanges and white-knuckle intensity of a fighting game. Focused in its faithful, no-frills representation of a sport much loved and played in the label's offices. Focused in its use of the latest gaming technology to recreate very little more than two people, a table and a ball.

From a company that usually puts ambition before precision, attitude before accuracy and content before form, it is a shocking turnaround. It's easy to believe that *Table Tennis* is just a next-gen test case, a tentative toe dipped in new technological waters. But if its making wasn't also driven by raw enthusiasm and a genuine hunger to excel in a new field, then it wouldn't be as brilliant as it already is.

It's a long time since we've seen a game (outside of the DS and Live Arcade catalogues, at any rate) that showed such stripped-back simplicity and immediately addictive qualities. *Table Tennis'* controls follow the standard tennis model perfected by *Top Spin*. The serve meter is almost identical, but there's a greater concentration on spin control, with the four buttons (or right stick, if preferred) providing topspin, backspin, and spin to both left and right. In an inspired bit of interface design, the ball's spin is indicated by a trail coloured to match the appropriate button, an essential guide to effectively countering your opponents' shots. Holding down a button charges a shot with more spin rather than more power and is a significant risk, requiring a great deal of sensitivity in guiding the shot's direction with the stick. Good play fills a 'focus' bar that, when applied with the right bumper, unleashes outright winners emphasised by dramatic slow-mo cutaways. On the basis of our Versus mode test, *Table Tennis* is easy to pick up, instantly rewarding and, thanks to the nature of the sport, generates an even more exhilarating pace than *Virtua Tennis*. Matches between novices and experts alike are tense and thoroughly watchable with the charismatic, screen-filling players and dynamic camera providing a lot more visual excitement than tennis games. As entertaining as it is in company, Rockstar is aware that a good online experience is vital, so it's promising to take great care over issues such as matchmaking, host migration, tournament options (including Spectator mode) and the lobby system. The biggest potential stumbling blocks are the opponent AI for the as-yet-unseen singleplayer Career mode, and the possibility that it may lack long-term depth.

At a confirmed price tag of £30, though, perhaps *Table Tennis* can afford to fall short in those areas. Next-generation gamers' appetite for small-scale games that don't cost the earth or promise the moon has already been proven on Live Arcade. In that context, it's easy to see this unaffected, offbeat, pure and simple sports game becoming an instant cornerstone of Xbox 360's social gaming repertoire.



Ping pals

At present the roster of players, evenly split between women and men, numbers just 12 – whether more will appear in the confirmed unlockable (or unconfirmed downloadable) content is unclear. They seem well balanced and strongly individual in style, validating Rockstar's quality-over-quantity approach. Each is rated on spin, speed, power and accuracy, and specialise in one particular shot. The characters also use eastern and western grips as appropriate. What's really refreshing, though, is how much personality they have, while still being credible and unglamourised – a real rarity in a sports game, and fun to play.





The crowd isn't visible during play, but its presence is felt through an atmospheric soundtrack. They'll chant and stamp for local heroes, while lone fans blurt out strangulated encouragement in moments of silence







Since table tennis is widely played but has a relatively low profile as a spectator sport, Rockstar didn't feel it was worth licensing venues or players, so these are fictitious. Equipment and clothing, however, are all branded and highly authentic



The five kingdoms in the game are all attractive and welcoming, and steer clear of the usual hackneyed themes. The best is the flying city of Moonhaven, a clockwork Victorian fantasy that's straight out of Wells





The character design is excellent across the huge cast: faithful to its iconic source, but with a chunky style of its own. At last the cute monkeys inhabit a game aimed at the children they've always seemed to be drawn for



Super Monkey Ball Adventure

Monkey Ball opens its arms to the kids it always wanted but never had – although it still might make them cry

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **TRAVELLER'S TALES**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **JUNE 23**

The world still tilts. If there's one thing that might reassure the protective fanbase that circles *Super Monkey Ball*, it's that. Even though Traveller's Tales has been tasked with reworking that pure arcade abstraction into a full-blown family adventure – replete with themed toytowns and odd-job-dispensing NPCs – elevating the encased monkeys from aimlessly cute icons to folk heroes on a mission in the process, it hasn't discarded the inverted physical logic that defines the game. The stick moves the world, which moves the ball, which moves the hapless monkey inside it. You may now be tilting the entire horizon rather than a platform floating in space, but the concept stays, and feels, the same.

So *Super Monkey Ball Adventure* is still largely about momentum, control finesse, and spatial navigation: a platformer in the true sense. There's a story of sorts, involving the elopement of the prince and princess of two feuding monkey kingdoms to AiAi's home, Jungle Island. However, the true quest is to unite the five fractured, mistrustful monkey kingdoms by spreading joy, which you achieve, naturally, by doing chores for people. These tasks, and even basic exploration, mean navigating narrow walkways, negotiating hazards and hitting time limits. There is no jump button, though bouncy pads get frequent use, there isn't anything that you'd really call combat, and antagonists (the wonderfully named Naysayers – evil, fat clowns that manifest unhappiness by leeching the colour from their surroundings) tend to be few and far between.

Aware perhaps that the *Monkey Ball* universe's tenuous coherence is in danger of unravelling completely, Traveller's Tales is making an effort to weave its disparate threads together. Classic *Monkey Ball* level design features in both an old-school challenge mode and as an area-unlocking mechanism within the adventure. The six minigames are integrated with the story mode, too, with Monkey Target-style flight sections, cannons, and the Monkey Fight boxing glove appearing as one of the monkeys' ten 'chant' powers. These are activated by a spell pattern and seem evenly split between ill-fitting cliché and smart, simple extension.

It's heartening that Traveller's Tales is determined to stay close to *Monkey Ball's* spirit and style, even as it contorts the franchise into a drastically different shape. But although it has cleared most of the conceptual hurdles, serious technical and design issues remain. It's fair enough for the controls' exacting precision to be relaxed a little, but a perfect framerate and consistent, convincing physics are vital for this game to work, and neither are in place yet.

Balancing the difficulty so it both honours its hardcore tradition and satisfies the youngsters it so obviously appeals to is a near-impossible task, and could well end up alienating both audiences. Charming and clever in places, plain and indigestible in others, *Super Monkey Ball Adventure* won't be sacrilege, but it might not be half as polished and vibrant as it needs to be.



The PSP version features an extra character. This is a mysterious monkey from the future who reveals the *Monkey Ball* backstory plus 15 more levels, and an exclusive card game. Its looks match that of its home siblings' but the framerate is currently well below par





Monkey see, monkey smash

The six minigames comprise three Sega favourites: Race, Fight and Target plus three originals of Traveller's Tales' own devising. Fight is much the same; Race seems faster and less challenging, more knockabout; Target is oddly at its best the farthest it strays from the original template, with updraft-assisted endurance courses over huge distances. The new games are all bold tries that look likely to miss the mark by a narrow margin. Bounce involves colouring squares on a board before your opponents; Tag is a frantic chase around a tiny, spherical world; while the best, Castle, involves shooting monkeys out of cannons in order to topple your opponent's towers of bricks.



The levels of classical *Monkey Ball* are often sound, well-designed challenges, but they currently lack the devious inspiration, playful presentation and aesthetic quality possessed by those from the original game



To leave each level of each dungeon you'll need to find this talisman and carry it to the exit. Sometimes hidden in chests, it also drops from enemies, necessitating a thorough cull





Children Of Mana restrains its use of the DS's functions to LAN play. The lower screen is used only for menus and maps, leaving the top screen free for some of the richest and most atmospheric 2D art yet seen on the handheld



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SQUARE-ENIX**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

Children Of Mana

Not so much a child of SNES classic Secret Of Mana as a prettier, more sociable cousin. But is it also duller?

For a game most often name-checked for its menu system, *Secret Of Mana* always had a wealth of other pleasures to offer, from its lush environments to its absorbing combat and its engaging story. And, at first sight, *Children Of Mana* looks set to top it, with sumptuous locations and rambunctious, punchy action. But there's a caveat: this isn't an adventure. There's no story, no towns to explore, no elemental powers to unlock. A pure dungeon crawl, *Children Of Mana* limits its horizons to the multiplayer coop mode which so many SNES owners remember with such affection: requiring multi-cart link-up, up to four players can fight simultaneously, deepening the tactics and expanding the spectacle of the singleplayer game.

The basic play pattern barely changes throughout the game: set off from a hub village, where you can shop, volunteer for quests and choose one of the eight elemental spirits from *Secret Of Mana* to accompany you on your quest. Flammie makes a return to transport you to the world map, but she'll only take you direct to dungeons. Then it's a case of hacking and slashing through a few levels to get to a boss. Later optional quests will take you back to completed dungeons, but will change the enemy types you'll face. These are smartly designed to extract the maximum challenge from the seemingly basic combat: with a sword, a flail and a bow at your disposal, enemies can be knocked into each other – and into objects – and are likely to rebound into each other and into you, creating a bumper-car brawl of controlled chaos.

In multiplayer, these battles are even more frenetic, but the controls are so precise and the balance between blocking, direct and ranged attacks so clear that you always have a fighting chance. Item use and weapon selection are managed via those famed ring menus, and never hold up battle at all. Monsters killed contribute to experience which levels up your character and gives access to the more advanced equipment you find hidden around each level. It adds a sense of progression throughout the game, but does little to mask its inherent repetitiveness. And, while it's unfair to criticise *Children Of Mana* for not being a pure sequel to *Secret Of Mana*, it will perhaps prove reasonable to criticise it for not finding enough variety in its pared-down, if beautifully tooled, dynamics.



The ring menu makes a return, letting you quickly swap between weapons, as well as items set to your quick-use button – vital for tackling different enemy combinations



A sprite's best friend

Offering further variations to *Children Of Mana*'s combat style is your gem box, which can be set with precious stones you find in dungeons or buy from the jewellers. Each has a bonus effect – improving your stats, weapon strength or item effects, for example – and can also affect the power of your elemental spirit. New gems can also be created by synthesising them from combinations of old ones, and choosing the best combination of these to fit into your box – which gets larger as you move through the game – is *Children Of Mana*'s biggest strategic interest.

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **VIVENDI UNIVERSAL**
DEVELOPER: **RADICAL ENTERTAINMENT**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

Scarface: The World Is Yours

Vivendi resurrects the original king of Miami vice, but will he do his own memory justice?

Radical has worked hard on visuals, making this the most vibrant and accomplished-looking game of its kind on PS2





Radical's chief aim is to seed its world with 'entertainment value', which according to Weber means dialogue: 35,000 lines running at least eight lines deep for 220 characters, including all pedestrians





Gang rivalry

Comparions with Electronic Arts' *The Godfather* (see page 92) are inevitable, with both titles taking the same *GTA*-inspired route to adapting gangster movie classics starring Pacino. Weber is complimentary about the rival release, but thinks *Scarface* was always a better fit: "I thought they did some nice things, especially with their melee combat system, and they really nailed the characters. At the same time, while I am a Godfather fan, thematically it's a bit tired. The cars are old and a little bit uninteresting – same thing with the weapons. Visually, our game pops off the screen a lot more than theirs does. *Scarface* is a lot more sexy, in your face, over the top."

As publishers turn to licensing the classic gangster movies that inspired Rockstar's *Grand Theft Auto* in their continuing attempts to reverse-engineer its success, they and their developers face a problem. These films tend to be about the cost of violence, not the celebration of it, and their lead characters – like Tony Montana, Al Pacino's unforgettable Cuban cartoon from 1983's Scarface – have a tendency to wind up dead, face-down in a pool of their own hubris. Videogames have never been a perfect vehicle for a cautionary tale of rise and fall, so in this case, Radical's answer has simply been to rewrite the story as a rise, fall, and rise again.

The game begins where the film ends, with Montana's mansion overrun by the army





There's currently no sign of the PSP version of *Scarface*, but the word is that it will return to the plot of the original film



Scarface has Pacino's likeness and endorsement, though his voice is imitated. A bizarre cast list is rounded out by Cheech Marin, James Woods, Michael York, Ricky Gervais and Lemmy

of vengeful Bolivian drug lord Sosa, only this time he blasts his way out under player control and survives. The game is, then, to rebuild his empire in a fairly straightforward *GTA* clone: winning four Miami territories by dealing cocaine, laundering cash and taking storefronts and warehouses; building reputation by spending money on exotic vehicles (both boats and cars) and furniture in an alluringly tasteless 'pimp my mansion' mode; and completing a gunplay-heavy story, including trips to the Bahamas and Bolivia.

That gunplay seems more supple and sophisticated than most in the genre, with a choice of free twin-stick aim or a lock-on which can be finessed to hit certain body parts. Either way, good marksmanship (or timely foul-mouthed taunting) charges Montana's Balls meter, which unleashes a powerful firstperson 'blind rage' mode that refills health. On the streets, vehicles can be car-jacked as usual, but you can also have your own wheels delivered along with a driver, who'll offer support and is, like many of the henchmen you buy, playable. So far, so good, but on the basis of the preview code the mission design shows none of the variety, imagination or open-endedness that





have always set *GTA* games apart. Everyday progress could quickly become a chore, especially the golf-style intimidation meter that determines the success of drug deals.

Initial concerns about *Scarface*'s roughshod treatment of its source melt away, not so much because it doesn't take liberties (it plainly does), but because the film's fans love it not for its blunt parable but for its style, splatterhouse violence and strutting, scenery-chewing lead – all of which the game delivers with humour and affection. "What we set out to create is the best Tony Montana game," affirms senior producer **Cam Weber**. "He's a hip-hop icon and cultural icon... There's this market of 25-39-year-old males that just idolise this guy. We wanted to give people more of Scarface, another storyline they can enjoy." On that score, it looks likely that Radical will succeed, and find a huge audience in the process. But it's whether it understands the entertainment value of the 'open-world crime genre' as well as that of its licence that, on current form, looks in serious doubt.



One worry for what Microsoft says could well be its first true massmarket property on either Xbox is how well the piñata concept, rooted in Mexican tradition but also popular in North America and Italy, will travel to the rest of Europe and the world



The lushness and density of the environments is obvious, with wonderfully tactile textural effects. It will be incredibly important for Rare to offer enough variety and flexibility to clearly distinguish one player's garden from another's

Viva Piñata

Its to-do list finally cleared, Rare reveals a secret weapon with a soft centre

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **RARE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**

Apparently the brainchild of Chris Stamper and the *Banjo* team, this game of environmental management and creature collection looks like an attempt to blend some of the most rampantly successful and yet hardest-to-imitate concepts in videogaming: *Pokémon* and *The Sims*, with a little *Animal Crossing* for good measure. Microsoft is certainly not shy of the *Pokémon* comparison, as the deal with Saturday-morning kids TV network 4kids for a Viva Piñata CG animated series, and the expected march into merchandising, implies. But tempting as it is to intimate that Rare still can't quite bring itself to let go of Nintendo's apron strings, this looks like the most original design to come from the studio in years.

The conceit is that piñatas, the candy-stuffed papier-mâché creatures beaten open by children at parties, live in the wild on Piñata Island. The TV show will take place on one half of the island, and feature named piñatas whose neurotic, self-aware wisecracking aims them straight at both the parents and children of the Pixar generation. The game, however, takes place on the other half, and doesn't feature these characters (although crossover references are expected). Instead, the player will sculpt the unruly landscape into a garden – with the help of some strange, masked humanoid inhabitants – aiming to create a balanced ecosystem that will ultimately attract and sustain over 60 species of piñata, plus a number of presumably rare individual variants.

Wild piñata will appear around the island in monochrome, only revealing their eye-popping true colours when tempted into becoming garden residents – a neat touch that should inspire curiosity without sapping the desire to collect. Some will be attracted by certain kinds of plant, others by other piñatas; for the game to work, this apparently very simple system will need to have considerable depth and be well-seeded with secrets. Certainly the island's day/night cycle will come into play. As well as having what Rare calls 'complex relationships' with each other, piñatas will be menaced and turned against each other by red-and-black variants called 'sours' (after the sour-tasting candy found inside them when they die), who will have to be fended off by finding their own antagonist species.





It's not known how much input 4kids has had in character design, but in any event, it's some of the freshest and most appealing work to come from Rare's art studios in an age, while still strongly recalling its house style



The list of 62 species of piñata doesn't seem all that much when lined up against the massed ranks of the Pokémon – nor for a kind of game that really needs to be playable indefinitely. However, it's promised they will grow and change according to certain factors

Although at this stage some of the presentation seems unpleasantly ingratiating and all too aggressively aimed at a very young market, *Viva Piñata*'s progress through collection, community and personal customisation perfectly synthesises the 360's philosophy and the massmarket zeitgeist, as well as being a perfect fit for Live. With the animated series hitting the air in September, and given its family orientation and strategic importance, the game absolutely must make its Christmas release date. So here's hoping Rare can apply its usual polish and more than its usual inspiration without resorting to *Perfect Dark Zero* levels of brinkmanship, because this could be the game to finally bring the Xbox brand, and Live, to the players that always eluded it.



Viva Live

Viva Piñata has obvious and tremendous potential as a community-based game over Live, and you can be sure Microsoft won't miss a chance to demonstrate its full range of services to an uncritical young market. Trading animals between players will probably be the focus, but Achievements are said to be of central importance as well, and downloadable content (both free and premium) is promised, which could have a tremendous impact if synchronised with the TV show. There will also be a cooperative play style, and Rare hopes that a spectator mode will be both an enticing gardening showcase and an area of careful study for piñata-luring tips.







D&D's current campaign world, Eberron, is an overly contrived mix of cultural cues with abstract magic and steampunk. Even wreathed in hardware-choking lighting effects most of Stormreach is an unlikely city devoid of any real spark

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **TURBINE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach

D&D has forgotten the Forgotten Realms, but its new world plays almost exactly like you'd expect



Dungeon master's guide

A knowingly self-referential addition to each quest is a scattering of dungeon master dialogue, providing area flavour text and melodramatic readings of NPC outbursts. Future content is to include guest DM turns by original D&D creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson – a wry celebration of geekiness that, as well as the ability to choose the colour and texture of your hit dice, warms the heart (sadly, there's no option to pelt the DM with them).

Pen-and-paper D&D may be implicitly responsible for the MMO explosion but there's no love lost between the mediums – demonstrated by an ad campaign last year attempting to woo online gamers back to their junk-food-and-graph-paper roots. So it's no surprise that *Stormreach* isn't an MMO, the titular city instead providing a communal hub for private, party-based adventures. What is surprising is its obsessive dedication to D&D's intimate scale, providing none of the advancement grind typical of online RPGs, nor does it offer competitive or even solo play.

For a community-focused game it seems to share *Guild Wars'* failing of overthrowing all the MMO tropes except the one that it most needs to: the communication system. *Stormreach's* interface is universally clumsy and unattractive but the process of gathering a party through social-channel wanted ads and text-line petitioning is particularly alienating. Considering the game's focal use of taverns as rest points between quests, it's not hard to imagine alternative methods that could have both eased the process and enlivened these establishments – rather than the current situation of a crowd of avatars awkwardly emoting in silence.

Once the party has been solicited, members are left to make their own way from different corners of the city and to determine if they're actually eligible for the quest, then *Stormreach* at last finds its feet. Those feet are set on the well-trodden paths of tunnel crawls, frantic skirmishes, trap evasions and barrel smashing, but undeniably capture the essence of D&D modules. Drawing more from *Dark Alliance* than *Baldur's Gate*, combat involves manual attacks, blocks and dodges, and play flows with a welcome urgency that makes even the lengthier quests feel less like a commitment. As a side effect, there's little respite for keyboard communication so those unwilling or unable to use the provided voice support will be left hacking in companionable silence.

It's still difficult to tell if *Stormreach* is enjoyable in spite of itself – carried on the accidental alchemy of cooperative multiplayer rather than design – or if Turbine truly understands how to deliver a minorly multiplayer RPG. The game's structure and monthly fee are intended to support regular new micro-adventures, yet high-end 'raid' content (an MMO staple requiring scores of players) suggests old habits die hard. Perhaps more important is the issue of bringing life and society to the barren city itself, and not just fleeting fellowships in its catacombs.

The draw of D&D, after all, was as much talking about your adventures as playing them out.



Treasure chests generate a random selection of items for each player. This is usually followed by a swapping spree, with everyone distributing equipment to the classes that can use them. While the shops sit in the communal section of the game, players do not affect the economy



The game has been given an entire lost continent of Eberron to house quests in – although there's no real sense of travel, scale or distance outside of Stormreach proper. It's a welcome break from the city's sewers, vaults and ruins, though

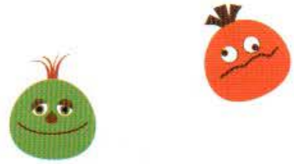


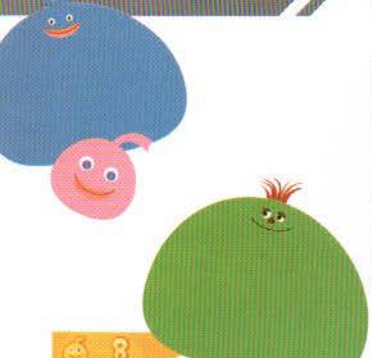
Regardless of the action-based presentation, the combat is faithful to dice rolls and statistics. Lapsed or new D&D players may be alarmed by the 3.5 ruleset's reams of feats, skills and proficiencies, and it is unfortunate that the game makes little effort to ease them into it

FORMAT: **PSP**
PUBLISHER: **SCEI**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **SUMMER**

LocoRoco

Sony Japan's attempt at hands-off platforming teaches an interesting lesson in fluid dynamics





The challenge for PSP developers has been one of scale, a struggle to shoehorn console-quality gameplay into the more limited capabilities of the portable hardware, so it's interesting to see Sony itself taking precisely the opposite tack, and making good on the industry's tried, tested and long-overdue love affair with simplicity.

That simplicity is evident in every aspect of *LocoRoco*. Apart from the obvious control scheme, which utilises little more than the shoulder buttons to tilt the world beneath LocoRoco's liquid posterior, it also extends into the make-up of the world itself. SCEI has reduced the environments into their vector-impressionist superflat essentials – weight, velocity, shape and pure shocks of crayon-box colour – then given it life by introducing irresistible reductionist emoticon charm.

What's surprising is how much Sony seems ready to do with so little. Just two dots and a downward curved line give the LocoRoco all the pathos and vulnerability it needs to bring about the underlying tension, especially coupled with the knowledge that with such indirect control, every ten-degree tilt needs to be carefully considered.

But that's not to imply tedium: after settling into the game's restrictions, a rigorous and satisfying sense of rhythm and pacing takes hold, both your own and in the labyrinthine levels' bursts of hands-off rollercoaster sequences that whip the hapless Locos to otherwise unreachable destinations.



As much as the game rewards fearless exploration, an end-level droplet tally and desire to protect stress caution in navigating its environment. Take a hit and a droplet rolls away, but it can be safely re-assimilated

Though Sony has promised that the best of *LocoRoco* has yet to be revealed – the preview stops short of introducing the dreadlocked Rasta Muji and the prospect of more active enemy avoidance – it's heartening to find a surprising amount of replay even in what little is there. The levels shown are tightly packed with numerous hidden objects and, with weight-determined switches and concealed passages, secret areas blocked off to all but the most protective and daring players.

In many ways, then, one of Sony's most forward thinking and progressive ideas is also its most backward looking, a rigidly simplistic concept drawn out in quivering jellied form, and with all its innocent charisma, seems poised to win over all ages.



There's safety in numbers: the LocoRoco is actually a congealed form of many, smaller Locos that gain their ponderous weight by eating local flora. Tapping a button brings forth a peal of thunder that separates them

New Super Mario Bros

The biggest hit of the GDC showfloor wasn't a next-gen epic, a physics-heavy shooter or an indie darling – just an old friend



FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **NINTENDO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MAY (JAPAN), SUMMER (UK)**

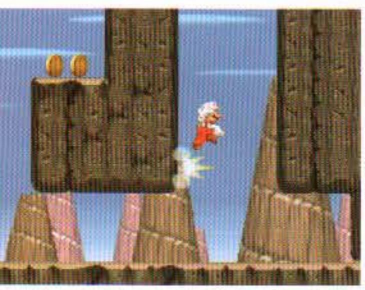
Put a *New Super Mario Bros* cart into a DS and it turns it from an inert gadget into a machine for playing that game and that game alone; put that DS into your hands and it turns you into a machine for playing *Mario*. The DS may be about making gaming accessible to newcomers, but its new killer app is about demonstrating how extensively 15 years of *Mario* games have hardwired your head. *New Super Mario Bros* trades on almost every *Mario* instinct you've absorbed over the years, from wall jumps to ceiling breaches, and butt stomps to red coin collecting. Controls are precise, the sense of momentum is as intoxicating as ever, and early levels are riots of imagination and interaction. All you want is for it not to stop.

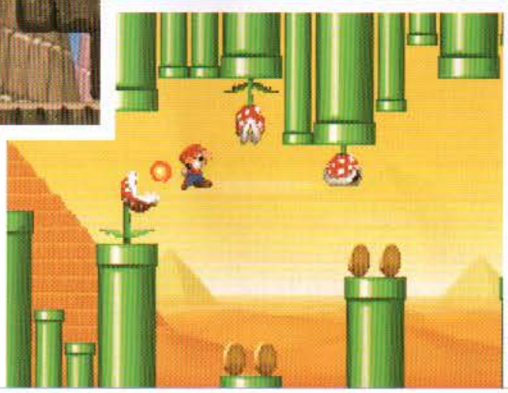
And it's that feeling that makes a short playtest of the game somewhat worthless. Every trigger that the game relies on is indelibly associated in your mind with some of the finest gaming of the last two decades, and the pleasure of having those synapses fired forms much of your early impression of the game. The main notable difference is the difficulty, which is much more kindly calibrated, coddling Mario novices with mushrooms and mid-level checkpoints as they learn the complex regulations of his universe. The richness of these worlds and the subtleties of their challenges used to be enough to make a game, but for this flagship title they are supplemented: an overworld map gives access to previously completed levels, as well as presenting opportunities to earn extra items; a wireless multiplayer mode lets you scramble for stars against a so-far-unconfirmed number of opponents; and there is the suite of minigames taken from *Super Mario 64 DS* retooled for multiplayer.

And then there are novelties: the mega-mushroom whose screen-smashing appeal is undimmed since its original unveiling, a new koopa-shell suit which lets Mario slide through enemies, trampolines that float you into a spin jump. It is, quite simply, too much to take in during a short, showfloor session. But there's no question that it's easily enough to raise some very real hopes that this will be a game which lives up to the bold promise of its title.









Concerns about the game's clashing 2D/3D looks are transformed by the Lite. The 150-watt lustre shining from each screen makes sense of the not-quite-pastel, not-quite-primary colours, and adds clarity and energy

Fighter's evolution

Having acknowledged Japanese gamers' newfound desire to be recognised, Virtua Fighter is finally tuning in





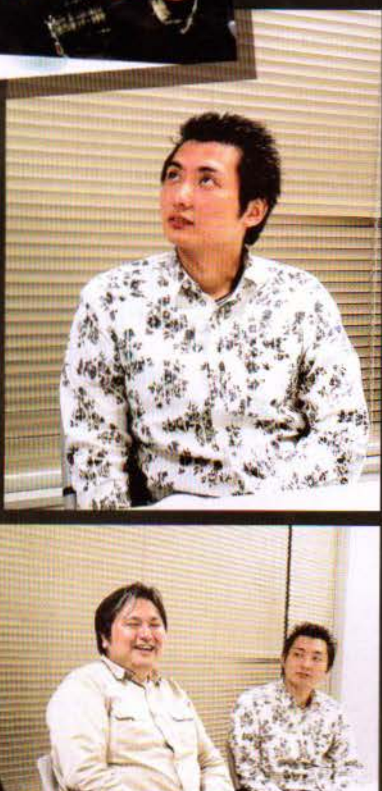
The first rule of *Virtua Fighter* is: you do not talk about *Virtua Fighter* when you're playing it. The second rule of *Virtua Fighter* is: you *do* talk about it at any other time, whenever you get the chance. This is a club you don't access via invitation but via the absolute investments of time, energy and money pumped into cabinets. And, if playing out of arcade hours, a top-flight arcade stick. Cobble one of those together like some Sanwa-branded lightsabre and you're all set for months, some would say years, of gaming's highest education. If just getting involved sounds daunting, then imagine what it's like for the referees and organisers at this phenomenon's core.

As Sega's AM2 division readies *Virtua Fighter 5* for action, it faces responsibilities that go beyond showcasing the Lindbergh arcade board and bringing Japan out of fake shadows into a shader-based world. For the fans, split as they are into staunch conservatives and proponents of change, every adjustment to *VF* invites scrutiny worthy of any MMO or vertical scrolling shooter. The new

TITLE: **VIRTUA FIGHTER 5**
FORMAT: **ARCADE**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **AM2**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **JULY**







game has to remain politically correct while proving progressive enough to command precious floor space amid increasingly diverse arcade cabinets. As project leader **Makoto Osaki**, director **Daichi Katagiri** and planner **Taku Kihara** explain, that doesn't mean shepherding the genre's dwindling coin-op cliques so much as unifying them.

First of all, how would you summarise the direction *VF5* is taking?

Makoto Osaki: We wanted to develop the core idea of 'community' that *VF4* created. With that game we introduced the concepts of networking, IC cards, team play and collectables, creating in the process a wider network of players. Now we want to bring that idea to another level. In Japan, we don't have the professional gamers or superstars that appear overseas. We believe that the chance for players to become celebrities – to appear on some kind of television channel – will invigorate that community.

February's AOU Show saw the VF.TV feature touted as *VF5's* key innovation. Is such progressive design becoming difficult to achieve in the fighting genre?

MO: In terms of game experience, I think that *VF4* was very much complete; we delivered quite an achievement with that game. *VF* is ultimately about two fighters competing on a single plane – a model that can be very difficult to escape from. The possibility of free movement is a very delicate issue that we considered with *VF5*, but realised would offer no improvement. On the contrary, in fact, *VF5* is about an 'impression of realism' rather than true realism – you won't find any hands being broken, for instance. *VF5* does, however, introduce actions that you'd consider natural in a one-on-one fight such as sidesteps, placing them on top of the basic single-plane model.

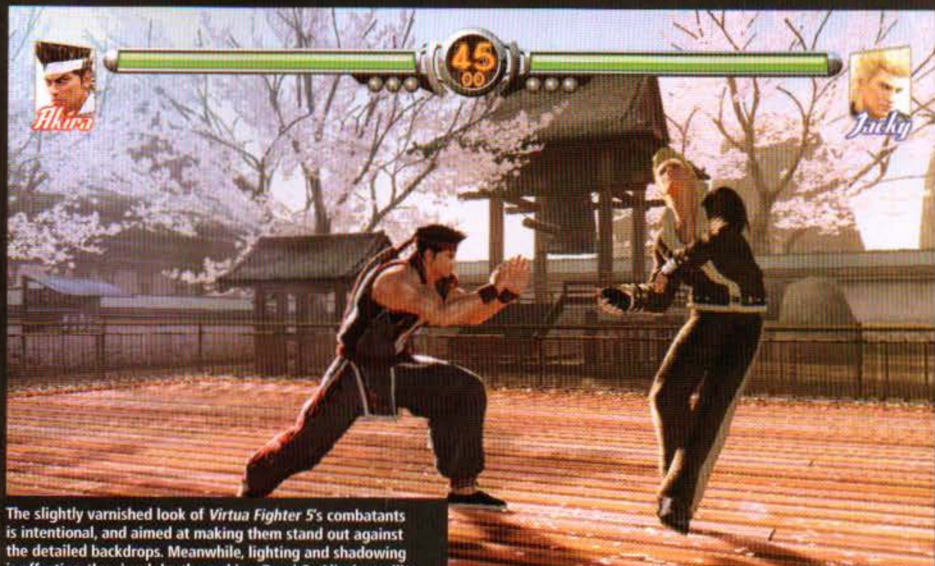
Daichi Katagiri: We try to stay true to the genre's core concept and arrange things around it to improve the experience. This is how the series has evolved since its debut. The version displayed at the AOU Show was mostly feature-complete, but things such as balance are going to change greatly as we progress towards the final version. For example, the version we have right now is a world apart in terms of gameplay from the show version. If you consider that to be the skeleton part of the game, now we're putting the muscles on it. There you were able to perform some side actions, for example, but they weren't so significant. They're now a very apparent and important part. Still, you must always stay true to the core of the game.



Manifestating the team's desire to enhance *Virtua*'s single-plane combat without overstretching it, a new set of stumbling animations are now triggered by a successful hit to the side. Expect to see them and diagonal dashes play important roles



Left to right: director Daichi Katagiri, project leader Makoto Osaki and planner Taku Kihara waste no time in stressing how demanding the project, understandably assumed by some to be a mere update, actually is. *VF5* is a mammoth undertaking



The slightly varnished look of *Virtua Fighter 5*'s combatants is intentional, and aimed at making them stand out against the detailed backdrops. Meanwhile, lighting and shadowing is effective, the visual depth mocking *Dead Or Alive*'s sterility





THE NEW CHALLENGERS

If tweaking individual animation frames is deemed cause for unrest amongst *VF* fans, then the addition and removal of entire characters deserves at least an explanation. Few are questioning the appearance of Luchador El Blaze and his unique range of throws, but how does AM2 justify bringing in Eileen, a martial artist that some might argue is redundant with the continued presence of Lion? "Eileen is actually very different from Lion," explains Katagiri. "I admit that the AOU version didn't make that apparent, but users are in for a surprise if they're basing expectations on that. During one location test of *VF5*, Eileen came second in a popularity test. Personally, I was surprised." One more question on the topic of characters: why was Vanessa Lewis' costume changed for the western version of *VF4*? "In America, they told us she was 'too sexy'," Katagiri explains.

When you're tuning the series' balance, how important a role do professional gamers and their opinions play?

DK: We never take into account the opinion of one particular person, even if they're a so-called professional. We do receive feedback during location tests and try to establish general issues with the game, but we don't want to focus on individual opinions that might not be representative of everyone. Analogue controls, for example, don't suit a fighting game particularly well and introduce too great a margin of error in the game's balance. So we try to base everything on our own *experience*.

What possibilities does the Lindbergh offer the experience that previous boards did not?

MO: Well, more dots on the screen, really. The Naomi 2 was VGA; with Lindbergh we can render and output in high definition and widescreen. Additionally, Nvidia's graphics chipset has allowed us to use HDR [lighting], which is a great improvement. Looking at the specifications, of course, Lindbergh seems to be just like a PC. In terms of game experience, however, the larger screen gives players greater room for manoeuvre.

DK: Lindbergh isn't changing the core concept of the series: simple actions with significant ramifications. But it does allow us to pursue a goal of offering a better sense of realism.

MO: We had a glimpse of HDR technology when working with Chihiro. We experimented with it and learned a lot while developing *Virtua Cop 3*, *OutRun 2* and *Ghost Squad*, all of which provided useful experience. In Japan,



the majority of programmers come from the console and arcade worlds, while overseas many more come from a PC background. We were very much behind in terms of knowhow and experience with the PC-based technologies we're now heavily using. *VF5* has helped us fill some of the gaps and I'm pretty proud of the visuals we've managed to achieve. Until very recently, this was an unusual line of work in Japan and we've had to greatly adapt our working methods.

"WE'RE NOT ONLY DEVELOPING A GAME THIS TIME, BUT A FULL RANGE OF COMPLEX SERVICES THAT INCLUDES RECORDING VIDEOS FOR OTHER USERS TO DOWNLOAD"

What's been the most difficult issue you've faced so far?

MO: Networking. We're not only developing a game this time, but a full range of complex services that includes recording video and uploading it to a server from which other users can then download. As our main programmer likes to say, we're developing the equivalent of three games. You can't imagine how heavy the workload is when developing an entire environment. To be honest, we're doing too many things at the same time and the thinking process behind managing all these tasks is exhausting. The visual improvement alone is daunting enough.

Taku Kihara: We have to consider ways for people to enjoy the game when they're not playing. Such a complete environment is something we have to create from scratch.

DK: We're touching things that we're not used to or simply not supposed to do as a game developer. Simply showing replays [in VF.TV], for example, is unsatisfactory and will in no way bring us closer to our objective. So we have to decide what would be fun in that regard and what details, such as the right lengths of each programme that we broadcast, should be. These are basic issues we had to



Able to make full use of his natural environment – the squared circle – El Blaze is guaranteed a painless induction into *VF5*'s roster. AM2 has devoted a lion's share of early publicity to his showstopping costume designs, aerial attacks and throws

confront before even starting to think on a more advanced level.

How well do you think you're making use of the Lindbergh board's resources?
MO: I'd say we're pushing the board almost to its limit. It's hard to estimate the precise level, but I'd say somewhere around 95 per cent. *VF5* is the perfect title to use the board's power.

There have been some comments regarding the fighters' skin looking plastic – what's your response to that?
DK: Initially we drew the skin very realistically but when we watched the game in motion we realised that the characters were difficult to spot. So we opted to rather keep to our 'sense of realism' approach.

If developing a sequel solely for your fans runs the risk of reducing your audience, how do you find the balance between pleasing them and finding new players?
MO: This is a very difficult issue, and it's why we're developing the community concept. If VF.TV looks entertaining, it will convince new users to try the game and get involved.
DK: We're certainly not changing the game balance to give newcomers a better chance against veterans. We need to ensure we can please the fans and then create a more appealing environment for new users to enter. To have a successful and dynamic community you need the supply of new users to be constant; we've designed the entire *VF5* project accordingly. That said, there are a few new features we've yet to announce that should appeal to everyone.

"WE'RE NOT CHANGING THE GAME TO GIVE NEWCOMERS A BETTER CHANCE AGAINST VETERANS. FIRST WE HAVE TO PLEASE THE FANS, AND THEN ATTRACT NEW USERS"



Did other new ideas emerge from the innovation of VF.TV?
MO: You know, VF.TV is itself the result of experiments we conducted with another game and a local TV show. At AM2 we have a network Mahjong game named *MJ* which has a large following. You add to this the concept behind a popular TV programme in Japan where someone commentates on the game in progress and you have something unique. And we wanted that feature. However, it required the installation of a live monitor cabinet in arcades and the operators didn't like the sound of this at all. It meant losing one cabinet, which meant losing revenue. We conducted a trial, however, and the results were immediately apparent. People would gather in large numbers in front of the live monitor. Usually, if all the satellites of the *MJ* were occupied with players, people wouldn't wait and would instead just leave the arcade. With a live monitor, however, they would stay while being entertained and would then buy a drink or go play another game for a short time until a satellite became available.

Suddenly, operators were enthusiastic about our new cabinet and where even our sales department had been unsure of its approach, that success changed everything. In the past, Japanese users were very shy and never liked to expose themselves to others. Today, they've changed and are more open. *DDR* is one example. I thought that game would never be accepted, but it met with huge success and surprised us.
DK: We don't speak of *DDR* players as 'gamers' but as 'performers' in a live show.

Both *VF* and *Fighting Vipers* attracted their share of stars – players such as Ikebukuro Raxel and Bunbunmaru. Does *VF5* seek to encourage every user to achieve the same level of reputation?
MO: Indeed. We don't want our game to just be localised to Tokyo, for instance. We want a





Scampering, flipping and rolling about opponents while firing off opportune kicks, Eileen looks likely to shed early similarities to Lion. Her style has been heavily refined since the AOU Show



While VF.TV should transform the way spectators enjoy the game, its network functionality will benefit combatants at the same time. Ranking meters make clear which matches are crucial

community that will expand throughout the entire country, so great players can emerge in any part of Japan, even in the countryside. Where VF.TV is available at home, people will see new stars emerging in other parts of the country. I'm pretty sure that people will start talking online or via their mobile phones about the great players they saw on VF.TV that day.

Why do you think the popularity of the fighting genre appears to be in decline?
MO: Compared to the time when *VF* and *Tekken* were released, the market capacity has indeed shrunk. But in Asia the genre still has strength. The *VF* name remains very popular and the business very much alive.

With more and more fighting games being developed for the consumer market, often skipping arcades entirely, how do you see the coin-op side of the business developing? Will *VF* ever become console-exclusive?
DK: *VF* is *VF* and will keep running in arcades until the company tells us otherwise. We welcome any other games that enter the arcade market and help to make the fighting scene more dynamic.
MO: We're designing *VF5* for an arcade-only configuration. The services and community we're building couldn't be reproduced on consoles. Those platforms favour directions which are totally different to the ones we've chosen. One of our philosophies since the very beginning has been that if a game doesn't perform in the arcades, then there's no demand for a port. That hasn't changed. We're making *VF5* for today's Japanese arcade scene and I believe it suits it very well.

With this being the series' fifth iteration, does *VF* still have room to expand, or are you starting to consider new IP?
MO: I think we had the same question in mind while making *VF4*.
DK: Indeed, we designed it thinking: 'Let's do one last *Virtua Fighter*'. It met with great success and gave us new ideas to make this next one. We're doing all we can to ensure that this new game delivers on that potential.
MO: There are other issues, too. For instance, when developing *VF4* and its network features, we were limited to the technology available at the time. We had to work with ISDN, for example – quite a narrow band compared to what we have today. With ADSL, cable and optical fibre, we have a totally different environment to work in, placing new possibilities in front of us that give us new ideas. Arcades were reluctant to get ISDN connections for the benefit of our game: "Why should I buy your expensive cabinets?" they'd say, "only to then pay for an expensive internet connection as well?" That was the basic reaction. But the success of *VF4* and its new network features changed their minds.

It's like the success of the iPod Movie. This would have never happened without broadband. One new technology can have an impact that reaches far and wide. To stay with that example, the podcasting revolution is another consequence of broadband being introduced. For our VF.TV replays, several dozen megabytes would have required hours to be transferred without a broadband connection. Users might wait for ten or 20 seconds, but they won't wait *that* long.

Were there potential additions that you shied from making for fear of the audience's reaction?
MO: None, I think. There's a formula that we maintain from one *Virtua Fighter* to another. If we have to break it then we develop a different game, a new series. *Fighting Vipers* is an example of us doing just that. The time fans get angry with us is the time that we announce the next *Virtua Fighter* as an FPS.
DK: That'll never happen, incidentally!







Subtle tweaks to the *VF* combat model, which as AM2 suggests will have considerable effects, include the lowering of floats to lessen damaging combo opportunities, a more apparent range of character speeds, and greater strategic emphasis on foot position


ENGLAND
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Into the darkness

Where next for grasshopper manufacture after Killer 7? Everywhere, it seems, as we experience a close encounter with its CEO Suda 51's next-gen plans

"I was getting positive messages from Argentina, the Middle East, so many countries I'd never even thought of, and then I started to dream of winning awards from Europe and overseas. This was a wild dream – I mean, whoever heard of grasshopper?" laughs **Suda Goichi**, aka Suda 51, grasshopper manufacture's CEO, game designer, director and scenario writer.

As a boutique Japanese developer of pop culture-swathed, hallucinatory adventure titles, previously only the most dedicated of the import set could raise their hand to that question – at least until Goichi's lucky numbers came up: the Capcom 5 and the *Killer 7*. Combining grasshopper's cut-up production techniques with Production Studio 4 producer Shinji Mikami's guidance – perhaps the development equivalent of drink and drive – that title's polarised reception cast Goichi's company as a global cult commodity.

"I was stunned," Goichi shakes his head, "so happy you can't imagine, to see so many awards come from overseas – you know, practically all the awards came from outside of Japan. And that praise made a big difference in the way the media viewed us: without *Killer 7*, I don't think Famitsu would give us the attention they do now." He grins wryly. "Or **Edge**."

While *Killer 7* didn't go entirely snubbed in Japan, earning Famitsu's Platinum award, Goichi was unsurprised to find local response was reserved. "Japan's game market is focused on gamers who are used to a certain experience with one set of controls, and you face a very sceptical audience when you try something outside of this vision," he explains. "What's different overseas, and especially with Europe, is that people are open to new ideas, and don't hesitate to praise innovation." We



suggest the markets might not be so dissimilar, given that the game proved an equally hard sell outside of Japan, and Goichi concedes: "It was a development filled with uncertainty, especially over the on-rails travel, but I really thought it was good that we took the risk. Of course, this didn't translate into sales for Capcom."

It's a backhanded compliment that *Killer 7*'s not the sort of title to go overlooked: most gamers simply couldn't manage to outstare it when it caught their eye. The two-button movement scheme survived through several development crises of confidence because Goichi wanted an experience any player could enjoy – so was it a bitter irony that its simplicity



"For Kurayami I want to deliver a very specific, totally new pixel shader based on darkness: an artistic texture, mixed with various effects"

turned audiences away? "With the US, especially, that was a decisive factor, as they think the level of freedom you have to move inside the gameworld defines the quality of your action game," Goichi sighs. "I think it's quite a severe response, but I can understand it. We made the choice, and *Killer 7* is a game you like or you don't – there doesn't seem to be a middle ground."

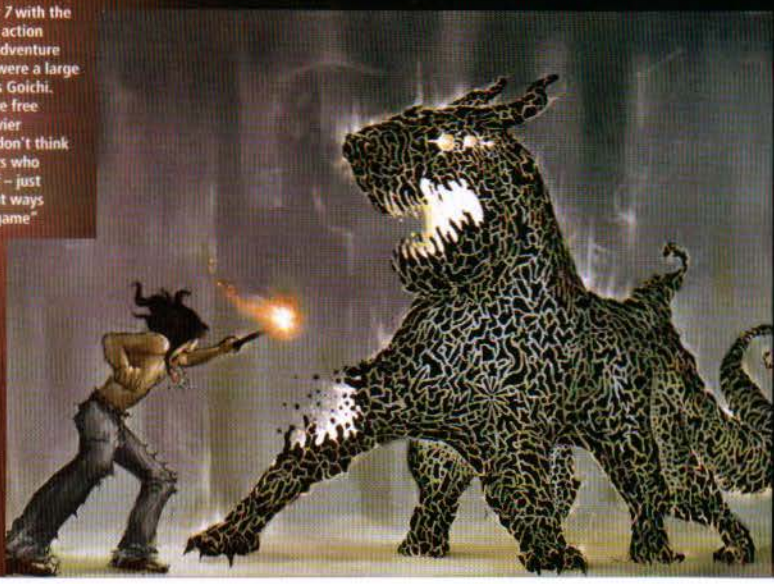
Discussing its frozen firstperson shootouts, meanwhile, elicits a surprising admission: "You know, for some time I've been interested in combining my scenarios and grasshopper's visual touch into an FPS. I think we don't have the necessary skill to deliver it yet, so there's a learning process, but I hope that through the use of a 3D engine, or cooperation with another company, we could one day deliver it."

Grasshopper has already worked in tandem with other small developers (most notably on audio design for small-budget-and-big-robot king Sandlot), but *Killer 7* has widened the studio's circuit. "The industry can find grasshopper on a map now," Goichi says, "and as a consequence we have more work offers from publishers." These include an aesthetically fitting PS2 slash 'em up for Bandai based on the Samurai Shamploo anime, and DS RPG *Contact* in collaboration with Marvelous (previewed last issue). Goichi has also been a conspicuous presence at Kojima Productions recently, although we're left to guess at the bewildering outcome of such a union. As for a return performance with Capcom: "I'm open to anything, but Capcom alone decides whether there's a future for *Killer 7*."





Grasshopper's most exciting developments remain its own, Goichi portentously declaring: "The challenge now is to go beyond simple recognition, and transform our original games into a commercial success." Which brings us to PS3 title *Kurayami*. "The game is inspired by Kafka, a writer I greatly admire," Goichi begins, apparently not intending to make that challenge any easier on himself. "I thought for a



"I developed *Killer 7* with the idea that it was an action game, even if the adventure and the ambience were a large part of it," explains Goichi. "*Kurayami* will have free controls and a heavier action focus, but I don't think that will put players who enjoyed *Killer 7* off – just offer them different ways to experience the game"













A wander through the offices of grasshopper reveals that it's as dedicated a magpie of western culture as it is of local offerings. As for its game library (top), the presence of developer darling *Flashback* is little surprise; more so is the SNES version of Infogrames RPG *Drakkhen* – even more brutally obtuse than its ST original. Perhaps the torch carried by 16bit European experimentation has resurfaced far across the Pacific: *Kurayami*'s cast (above right) certainly fit the bill

TITLE: **KURAYAMI**
FORMAT: **PS3**
PUBLISHER: **TBC**
DEVELOPER: **GRASSHOPPER**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC**

long time about how to adapt the environment in his books into a game – to represent the mystery perhaps by applying filters, or dividing them into various missions. When I considered the visuals, I immediately thought of darkness, and I imagined a hero within this night, with a light that would in a way symbolise his life. That became the core concept of *Kurayami*: literally, 'darkness'."

Goichi lays out a series of concept paintings – currently the game's only visual representation, given that both its development and developer support from Sony are in their earliest stages. Should *Contact*'s gentle visuals not have indicated that grasshopper art design has more scope than violent-angled noir, then *Kurayami*'s striking stylistic jump confirms it.

"There are lots of toon-shaded titles on the market now, but when you look how the contrast of light and shadow is central in our mangas, even in comics from abroad, there are few games that use this sense of darkness. So I want to deliver a very specific, totally new pixel shader based on darkness: an artistic texture, mixed with various effects."

Kurayami's midnight world consists of a town huddled under a great castle, the object of the hero's climb. Safe only in well-lit areas, his guttering torch allows him to risk travel from one to the next, but the night through which he gingerly treads seethes with enemies. "It's not about some hideous monsters or evil creatures coming out of the darkness," clarifies Goichi, "but



It's obvious that *Kurayami*'s darkness is intended to be an entirely different feel to the void-black blankness that usually passes for the stuff in games: for the darkness itself to be something worth seeing

playing on our natural fears of the dark, and the uneasiness that comes from the absence of noise and life." Danger isn't exclusively a product of the hero's psyche, as the townsfolk's responses to his presence can also become heated – Goichi promising a less linear storyline than his previous works. "It shows how people change when faced with their fears – in a way, you could see a little bit of what Japan, or the world, is like in this town. But I want it to be a profound message, not one based on what's going on around me at the time development starts, or to voice some utopian idea like world peace."

With around 30 staff and a stubbornly Japanese insistence on developing in-house code libraries and engines, Goichi admits the prospect of PS3 development is daunting, though he's confident in his studio and Sony's still-unfinished console. "We're capable of taking on technically and financially heavy development – at least, one game at a time. Sony has a vision that as a creator I wanted to respond to, and to deliver this very detailed drawing shader, we need the PS3's power. Our main focus at the moment is to make these illustrations run in realtime."

Was the promise suggested by Sony's console his first choice? "Well, when you're based in Japan, the 360 isn't the natural choice. But since *Killer 7* was so appreciated overseas, I want to develop for our fans outside Japan – and in that regard, 360 development is very important. I think that as we get more used to the overseas market and industry, chances to work on 360 will come to us."



"I know it could be better for us to wait for Sony's final libraries, or to license the Unreal Engine, but the problem is waiting. Our first PS2 project took a hell of a lot of experimentation just to get anything moving onscreen," says Goichi

"Sony has a vision that as a creator I wanted to respond to. Our main focus at the moment is to make these illustrations run in realtime on PS3"



Though not the only Japanese developer looking to subvert pixel shaders – Sony's own Keiichiro (*Siren*) Toyama and doubtless his old *Silent Hill* team at Konami are investigating how to strip away gloss rather than add it – *Kurayami*'s vision is as fresh as we're learning to expect from grasshopper. Goichi feels that such an approach is vital, considering Japanese developers are entering the new generation on a disadvantage. "In the west, programmers coming from the PC have a huge lead on us in terms of technological knowhow," he says. "These PC-born engines can be ported up to the 360 and PS3, whereas in Japan, where our expertise is on consoles, you can be sure that most of the libraries cannot be reused for the new hardware. With the exception of the Revolution, moving to a new console means starting over."

So, starting over with a barbed fairytale that explores the darkness inside and outside of the mind: Goichi obviously enjoys flirting with risk. But will the industry or the audience be as supportive, especially in a local climate where stronger videogame ratings are being advocated by the likes of Ken Kutaragi himself? "I'm not sure," he admits. "*Kurayami*'s ideas are not about violence or eroticism, but fundamental problems in the human mind, which may find some conflict with the rating system. But if you consider the moral elements, starting from *Space Invaders*, videogames are basically about killing beings. I understand why the industry is trying to soften this key idea, change it to 'defeating' adversaries to be more acceptable, but I think it's almost criminal to diminish the impact of death, and maybe dangerous to depict it in a cute manner for a young audience. Though I expect the rating level to be quite high for *Kurayami*, I also expect the PS3 to be mainly purchased and used by an adult





audience. I'm making a game for an adult audience, one that shows what life is and what being human is."

It's a hugely enticing manifesto, although the matter remains of working it into a game with less friction between concept and method than was the case with *Killer 7*. "I've learnt so much working with Mikami-san," assures Goichi, "chiefly about the balance between travelling and fighting." (For a moment it's tempting to think he means the commute to Osaka and butting heads with the notoriously exacting producer.) "He really taught me the game logic, how to structure and balance and set the tempo, and these lessons will be even more important with *Kurayami*."

From Erotic Terrorists to Heaven Smiles, hip-hop samurai to planetfallen professors and now on into darkness, there's a sense that grasshopper never stops to find its feet before leaping onwards – but perhaps that contributes to its erratic magic. "*Killer 7* has been this milestone for us, this important step for me towards overseas markets, and understanding the inspirations of players abroad," Goichi offers as a closing message. "And that's pushed me to deliver a new experience which will satisfy those players, while still keeping true to my way of creating things."

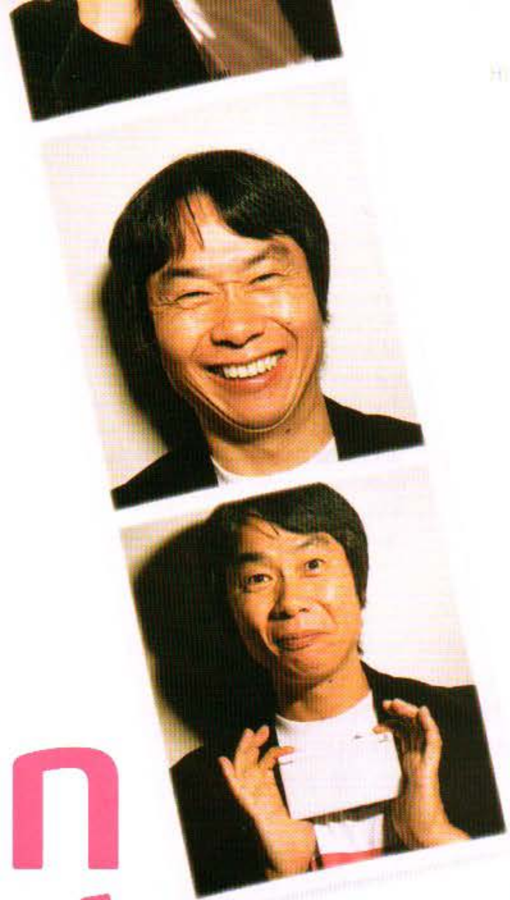
PRESS PLAY TO START



British pop music of the '70s and '80s has had a more obviously profound effect on Japanese development than it ever did at home. As unlikely as it seems, Queen is directly responsible for both *Ogre Battle* and *Guilty Gear*, while Kojima riffs on Joy Division's riffs, and in *Killer 7* Goichi pays lip service to – of course – The Smiths. But beyond namechecking, grasshopper takes its audio and soundtrack design seriously – evidenced by its January '25 Hour Party People' limited-invite-only celebration for fans. Videogame culture in the raw, you can experience the gig's opening number at www.grasshopper.co.jp/25hpp_top/25hpp_top.htm







His life in your hands



What happens when a doodler and dreamer becomes the senior managing director and general manager of Nintendo's entire game development programme?

First questions in interviews are always crucial, setting the tone for everything that follows. But sitting down with **Shigeru Miyamoto** during his recent European press tour, that first question is as inevitable as it is appropriate: 'What are you playing?' The Nintendo DS Lite in his hand is there partly for show, partly out of habit, but it's clear that he's more comfortable with it than without it. The answer, it's revealed, is *Nintendogs* – he's flicking it into Bark mode so his pup can meet those of any journalists similarly equipped. That done, he puts it down, but only to pick up a development card of *New Super Mario Bros*, his personal, hands-on pride in the character, the game and the machine clear to see. As he plays, Mario starts his eternal run from left to right and takes his first, his millionth, jump. Seeing the game in action makes sense of that pride. Miyamoto is a man who can hold his entire career in his hands, who can watch the world doing the same, and laugh in delight with them. Since his debut as Jumpman 25 years – nearly half of Miyamoto's life – ago, Mario has led a march which has never strayed from its simple goal: accessible, playful, entertaining games. In the DS that idea has crystallised into a piece of hardware and with *Mario Bros'* arrival comes the strong sense of a circle being closed.

Although the DS – and the forthcoming Revolution – are famous for being radical rulebreakers, has Miyamoto's plan always been the same as it was a quarter of a century ago – to make games that everyone likes and to make everyone like games? The big question with the DS has always been where the players attracted by non-game software like *Brain Training* and *Electroplankton* are supposed to go next. Does Miyamoto expect them to graduate to 'real' games or to see Nintendo's focus split between its traditional products and new kinds of entertainment software?

"I think that by the end of the last year, DS was selling very well to all kinds of people – ladies in their 20s, people in their 50s – and for many of them the DS was the very first games console they had ever purchased in their lives. And actually, many people in the industry and in Nintendo thought that maybe these newcomers to the gaming world would be only interested in the games like *Brain Training*, that maybe they would not be purchasing any more games afterwards. However, the fact of the matter is that they are now buying a lot of the so-called

traditional games, including *Super Mario 64*, so that was quite a big surprise for us.

"The surprising thing is that *Animal Crossing* has turned out to be the most popular and fastest-selling game on the DS – and that's the third edition of an existing game. The first and second versions enjoyed about 600,000 sales each but when it comes to the DS version of the game it's already topped the two million sales mark. Of course we really cannot afford to sit on this reliance of the non-gamers and casual game players, which is one of the reasons we're making *New Super Mario Bros.*" This thinking – that products like *Brain Training* and *Nintendogs* can operate not as rivals to traditional videogames but as honeytraps to lure non-gamers into feeling comfortable with the medium – isn't one that Nintendo has been emphasising.

If it works, it's clear that it massively expands the current market for the company's games – back towards the scale of their appeal in the early '80s. But is it a sustainable idea? How do you balance the needs of someone who has only ever played *Brain Training* with those of someone who has spent a quarter of a century at the controls of Mario? "Actually, that was the biggest challenging point for our development," Miyamoto agrees. "We are going back to the original *Mario Bros* – a 2D scrolling, platform type of game – but also incorporating the 3D gaming aspects from time to time. So regardless of your experience – whether you are an old gamer or a new gamer – you will find something you recognise in the game. We're now in a very interesting phase of development because we're having a lot of different testers look at the game, including veterans and first-time gamers. Very interesting!"

He doesn't elaborate, but he looks happy – it's clearly the rewarding kind of interesting, not the worrying kind. But finding a way to bridge the gap between gamers and non-gamers is only one of the challenges facing Nintendo. What about the difference in the response to the DS in Japan as opposed to the west? Will it ever prove as popular here as it has there? "What's happening right now is that Nintendo has been unable to introduce the new types of software in the west that we've been able to introduce in Japan. When it comes to Europe and the US, all we have done in the Touch Generations series is *Nintendogs*. I wish we could have done the localisation processes much earlier so we could have brought this software out last year, but we couldn't. However, I think this year is going to be the year that we're going to see the real evolution of the Nintendo DS, because... well... before I answer that, I have to ask you a question. What did you eat two nights ago?"

There is a pause. Thinking harder only makes the mind go blanker. Suddenly, light dawns – a burger! Too late. Miyamoto is already laughing. "Ha! You're quick. But this is what we do. This is what we did in Japan. We just asked: 'Do you like dogs?' We didn't say: 'Ah, there is a new game called *Nintendogs* for the DS available at this date and at this price', we just asked people if they liked dogs. And they said: 'Oh yes, I like to play with dogs'.

"They don't care what format it's on or how it works, they just like dogs. Then we asked what they ate two nights ago and everybody found that they had to think very hard about it, and that helped show how *Brain Training* was software that was one way or another relevant to their daily lives. It's not a game machine, it's not a personal computer, it's just *Nintendogs* or *Brain Training* and suddenly they felt: 'Oh, that's something for me'. And we haven't created that atmosphere in Europe and the US yet – but as long as we're asking things like 'Do you like dogs?' and 'What did you eat two nights ago?' then we get a reaction from people that's almost identical wherever we are.

"I don't think there are any national or cultural differences which change how people react to simple questions like that."

"If someone comes into your house and there isn't a Revolution sitting next to the TV, we want them to argue, and say, 'Oh! Why don't you have Revolution?'"

This vision – a real commitment of the idea of jeux sans frontières – is a key part of Nintendo's confidence in its policy of disruptive design, of trying to regain its competitive edge by breaking entirely new ground. But is this approach something which was just a solution to Nintendo's particular problems, or should the whole industry consider following in its wake? "Regardless of whatever industry you're doing business in, it isn't healthy for everyone to be heading in the same direction," states Miyamoto firmly. "Each of us needs to look into the possibility of some other directions all the time so that we can expand the core industry. So, because of that, I think what Nintendo is doing is right for the industry but if other companies believe that their future course is also right, then that's healthy too."

It's a politician's answer and it's quickly clear that it doesn't fully reflect Miyamoto's understanding of the problem: "As a game designer I've been quite concerned about the way the whole industry has been heading in the same direction. It feels as though in order to make one great game they're always adding to the cost, adding to the number of developers needed.

"Even when one or two people have great and unique ideas they just cannot introduce them to the market as it is at the moment – I know a lot of game developers are wondering if they are doing the right thing. They are thinking, 'What I really want to be working on is this project, this idea I have, but I don't see any way to do it. So I have to work on someone else's idea and develop that'. I really don't think that's a healthy atmosphere. How can the market be right if someone has a really great idea that could expand the industry, but the pressures that are there mean people are only interesting in making something really huge and big and gigantic?

"What Nintendo is trying to do is introduce a completely new platform which means we can give small teams with unique ideas the opportunity to make a great games. And those kind of great games have the potential to become the most successful software in the world. So I think it's definitely the right direction for Nintendo to be taking into the future."

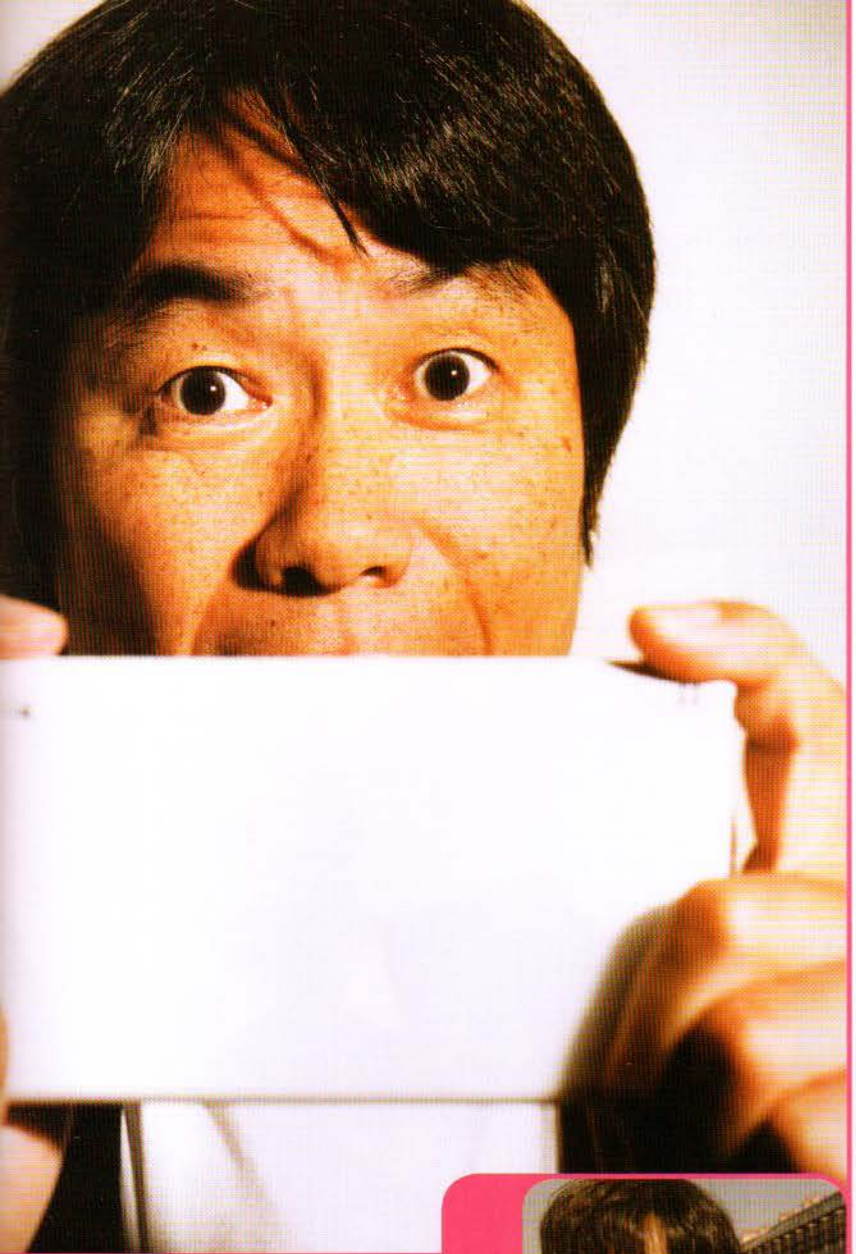
Being a trailblazer is hardly a new experience for Nintendo, but isn't there a concern that the other manufacturers might follow a little too closely? The explanation given for not showing the Revolution controller at last year's Electronic Entertainment Expo was that the technology would be too easily copied. Is that still a worry? Miyamoto is quick to laugh, but less quick to dismiss the idea: "I think that's a matter of pride for each corporation! But I am certain that the Revolution will become something really, really unique and interesting and that means there will be people who will want to copycat."

Not that copying the technology would necessarily do a competitor much good: Nintendo has consistently proven itself the only company able to make the fullest use of its own machines, often to the benefit of its own reputation and the detriment of its hardware's sales. Will the same be true for Revolution? "We always want to be the number one best creators for whatever Nintendo hardware platform we are talking about. We have to do that – of course! But what we're trying to do is to make the hardware that will drag out the very best possible quality from all the software. What we try to



be is the role model – we want other developers to learn from us."

That 'us' is a reminder. Once seen as a solo visionary, Miyamoto now oversees all of Nintendo's internal development, as well as a good deal of their second- and thirdparty products. Does he miss the close involvement he was once able to have with a specific project? "The fact of the matter is that I am now in a position to choose how to allocate my time. President Iwata has been very, very cooperative and supportive of me so that, for example, I don't need to go out and go on these PR tours (he gestures around the room





Alongside *Rayman*'s Michel Ancel and *Alone In The Dark*'s Frederick Raynal, Miyamoto was recently inaugurated as a Chevalier of the Ordre des Artes et des Lettres, France's highest honour for artists, performers, musicians and scholars



with a friendly smile which belies how much meeting and greeting he's done in the last week) so often nowadays because I can decide how to spend my time. Now I can work more closely on some select projects myself."

There's something a little presidential in his tone: once famous for cycling to work and sticking with his salaryman's wage, there was a time when his global duties – both in terms of game development and press relations – seemed to hang heavy on him. Now he appears buoyant, rejuvenated by his confidence in the direction the company is taking. Not least, perhaps, because that direction is taking him back to a wider, more diverse audience and the compact, innovative game design approach that made his name in the first place.

It's a part of the change which has swept smoothly through Nintendo since former president Hiroshi Yamauchi's retirement in 2002. Does Miyamoto think that the public understanding of the company has adjusted in light of those changes, or is there still a gap between how Nintendo is perceived and how it really is? "As far as Japan is concerned, thanks to the overwhelming success of the DS, I think a lot of people now understand what kind of company Nintendo is and what it is we are trying to do. In the rest of the world we are yet to see that but I think that this year is going to be very important – if we can send the right message to the customer then we will see people start to understand Nintendo.

"For example, when it comes to Revolution, we don't call it a next-generation console. We call it a new-generation console. We want each household to always have a Revolution console connected to their TV. If someone comes into your house and there isn't a Revolution sitting comfortably next to the TV, we want them to argue, and say: 'Oh! Why don't you have Revolution?' That's what we want to create. We want a brand new relationship between people and their TVs through the Revolution. And when we achieve that then people will understand what Nintendo is now and what Nintendo always has been."

This assured and salesmanlike tone isn't something you instantly associate with Miyamoto, but he is far from diffident in his ambitions for the Revolution, just as he is far from shy of trying to ensure that every photo we take includes his DS Lite. So, having raised the subject of the other next-generation consoles, does he have any salesmanlike comments about how Sony and Microsoft are addressing the future? Is there anything in their approach that he admires? There is an obvious, drawn-out pause. "Well," he says, finally. "In the case of Sony, I think their endeavours to create new chips and then to make enough of them to reduce the manufacturing cost – I think that's something that's nice for this industry, as well as for other industries. As for Microsoft, I think they have a good attitude to providing the developer kits and development environment that make it easy to make games. I think that attitude needs to be appreciated."

From one diplomatic minefield to another… Miyamoto is consistently heralded as the most influential figure in gaming's short history, but who does he see as the most important person in the industry? This takes even more thought. There's a quiet, but clearly amusing, discussion in Japanese during which Mario is suggested and rejected.

"How about Mr Yamauchi?" he chooses in the end. "I think he's the one person who really understood what is meant by the term 'entertainment' and who understood it best in this industry. He was willing to spend the necessary amount of the budget to create great entertainment. This means that as well as giving me great opportunities he's also given me a lot of money. Although," he grins, "of course I had to spend the money on making games." Of course.

With that moment of sharp humour, our time is up. However, before we leave, he beckons us over to a black case. Flipping it open reveals the insignia which represents his recent installation as a Chevalier of France's Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. The medal is beautiful – the emerald enamel and silver scrolls gleaming against the dark velvet – and appropriate. It was given to him to show a nation's recognition of a life's service to games and to their players. It should be a fitting testimony to the man and his matchless career, but it's hard to shake the feeling that the other handful – the one made of plain plastic and bright pixels – does him, and his creations, more justice.



The Station agent

After a star turn unveiling PS3 at E3 2005, and his appointment as president of SCE's Worldwide Studios, how does Phil Harrison see Sony's future as it faces the long-thought impossible task of winning the third round?



After revealing Sony's long-awaited strategy for PS3's online environment, SCE worldwide studios boss **Phil Harrison** is ready to answer the questions raised by his GDC keynote, and discuss launch plans, the power of PS3 and the future for PS2.

When you're preparing the kind of speech you gave today, how do you think about the audience, which is mostly developers but includes many journalists?
No disrespect to the media, but I have to make the presentation to the audience in the room, and these keynotes are always a bit distorted because of all of the big announcements that go on around them, but the presentation was intended for the people in the room: cool technology, show progress, show innovation and share some really hard facts, rather than do a raffle to win a hi-def television, for example.

Do you ever wish they were closed to the media?
Well, it's not that we have any secrets. It's not that I would keep information from one group or the other, but it's more the fact that the temptation is to do a press conference full of marketing materials, rather than doing a developer presentation which has hopefully useful takeout for the community. So hopefully we get that balance right.

Attention is mainly focused on PlayStation 3 at the moment, but PlayStation 2 is still the dominant format. After the last transition period there was a lot of talk in the industry about the need to handle the next transition better. Do you think that's happening?
That's a good question. I think the people who said it loudly last time were the CFOs of publicly traded companies, because they were saying: 'Look, we got hosed because we didn't handle the transition effectively enough', and I think when Larry Probst and other





senior executives are saying we must do it differently next time around then that filters down through their organisations. But I think people also take their lead from us, from the way we're innovating, the way we're continuing to push.

But can they take their lead from you? Surely your focus now has to be showcasing PS3 and what the technology is capable of, and there are very few high-profile PS2 games left on the schedule.

That's inevitable, but I think with PlayStation 2 you'll see a more measured decline than with PlayStation. It's not going to be falling off the cliff like you've seen with Xbox and 360 – that product's just stopped, it's been delisted, but PSone is still selling, PSone software is still selling, and I think we'll see that with PS2.

But many of those titles will be less ambitious games aimed at a younger, less hobbyist audience. Now that high-profile development attention has transferred to PS3, have we already seen everything PS2 is capable of, or we will never get that chance?

Interesting! People used to talk about that in the 16bit era – 'Oh, this uses 98 per cent of the power of the machine' – and on a single-CPU machine like a Super Nintendo or a PlayStation you could pretty much get to the theoretical and practical maximum on the machine, but you can never do that on PS2 because of the distributed nature of the architecture – there's always some load-balancing to be done across the system – you'll never get to an absolutely theoretical maximum. But in terms of technology I don't think there's much left to be exploited on PlayStation 2, the libraries are about as efficient as they need to be, the balance between graphics, CPU, memory, devices, network is about as good as it can be given the constraints of the hardware. I don't think we'll ever get significantly better than we are now. I think in terms of creative and technical convergence, *God Of War* is about as good as it gets. That game is just technically stunning, and artistically stunning, gameplay wise [it's stunning] – I think that's probably the pinnacle.

"We control most of the manufacturing and production for the hardware ourselves, whereas Microsoft conversely controls none of it. That makes a huge difference"

You've announced the worldwide launch of PS3 in November, but there's always been the argument that worldwide launches are simply impractical – Microsoft has recently proved that they're far from straightforward, and even with PSP you chose to stagger the release. What's changed since the PSP launch to make a worldwide PS3 launch a better strategy?

The delay in Europe for PSP was not down to hardware manufacturing or production issues – it was a separate issue which caused us to delay in Europe, it wasn't a logistically based bottleneck. We could have gone worldwide on PSP but for some external factors. Sadly, I can't go into those. But our confidence for PS3 is based a lot on the fact that the hardware is basically done anyway now – the Cell chip is already in mass manufacture. We're ahead of the curve in a lot of things that are required for successful launch, and you saw from the schedule we'll have final hardware from an internal point of view in May or June. We also control most of the manufacturing and production for the hardware ourselves, whereas Microsoft conversely controls none of it – they don't manufacture any of their components themselves, and that makes a huge difference. So I can't tell you why or where they went wrong, but they obviously did.

Microsoft made a mistake in balancing the split of the stock it put out worldwide. What do you anticipate being your split worldwide between the different regions?

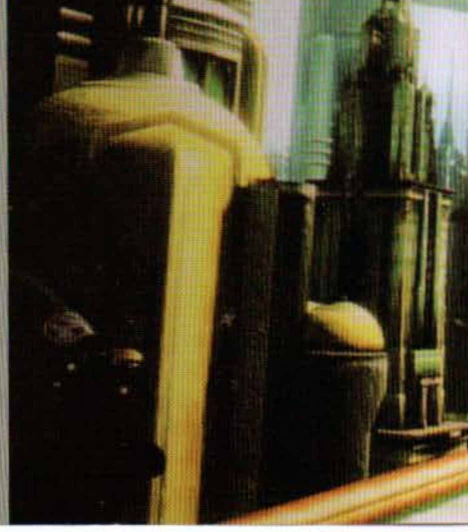
I'm the software guy, not the hardware guy – I can't answer that question. Also, it would be premature – we have a lot of time to make those kind of decisions.

Until fairly recently, the official line for the launch date was still spring. Now the date has moved to November, worldwide. Why should that timetable be any more believable than the spring timetable was?

Well, I don't want to give the wrong impression – it wasn't like we were lying about spring, I don't want you to form that impression. Factors that have been widely reported by the press which were beyond our control prevented us from achieving the intended



The Insomniac-produced trailer shown at GDC for an unnamed, but obviously *Ratchet & Clank*-centred PS3 project, whipped the audience at breakneck speeds through aerial traffic jams in a futuristic city



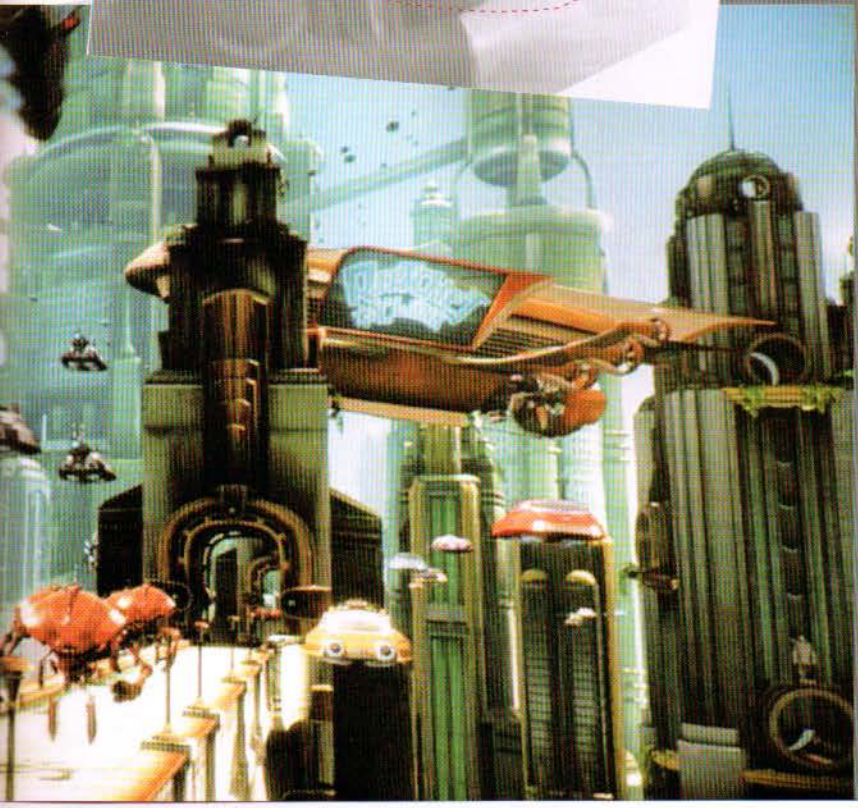


schedule, and frankly it depends where you are in the world as to how that news was received. If you're in Japan I accept that it's a disappointment to gamers that what they were looking forward to this spring will not come to fruition, but I think most people in Europe are rejoicing that it is definitely going to happen this year, so you have to balance it.

So it's 100 per cent certain that by the end of the year PS3 will have launched in all major territories?
A hundred per cent certain is a very definitive comment, and you're not going to get that out of me! Also, as I said, I'm not the hardware production guy, I'm the software guy, but what I can say is that from a software development point of view and the schedules for our titles, we're working towards a worldwide launch in November.



Harrison has been at Sony almost 15 years. He has also led thirdparty developer relations and helped launch the original PlayStation



You used your GDC keynote to announce the first details of PS3's online environment. For something that's clearly so integral to the PS3 vision, why was it announced so late, particularly if until recently you were targeting a spring launch?
I'm not sure that it's late so much as the fact that we're making it day and date with the hardware launch and I think that's good for the industry. And I think what we shared today was confirmation of what the industry had already assumed would happen, but hadn't heard it in absolute terms from us that this was indeed our strategy.

So for the people working on launch games, how much of what you outlined today was news and how much of it is already implemented?
We've been sharing a lot of that information with developers on a NDA basis for some time now, as you would expect.

Can we expect to see those features – things like downloadable content – implemented in launch games?
Oh, absolutely. Whether it'll be every game I don't know, but sure. And what I announced today in terms of the initiative to work with new developers on e-distributed content will yield some interesting results by the end of the year.

What you outlined in your keynote was a very ambitious environment. Looking at how Microsoft has built up its service incrementally, from the original Live service to the first Live Arcade to the full 360, how challenging is it to go from the more hands-off service that PS2 offers to such a detailed online environment?
Not that hard at all, actually, because of a couple of things. One, the people we have building the technology for us are the best people on the planet: SOE, the SCE-RT group and other experts we've brought in are all the best at what they do – they have built in some cases dozens of distributed and downloadable services with a great deal of success. But also, and perhaps this is a little bit harder to see from the outside – but we've been trailing this for a while – things like the downloadable content for *Wipeout Pure* on the PSP. These weren't isolated accidents, you know? These were things that we've been doing in anticipation and as preparation for this service going live with PS3. In the first 60 days in Europe our website served over a million pieces of content, direct downloads to the PSP, so we've got a huge amount of experience to draw on.

What you've described is a very open system – with fully downloadable games, and the possibility for thirdparty servers to connect in to the system. How will it be regulated?
That's a great question and a perfectly legitimate concern, but we've proven to be very good at regulation, in terms of QA and setting standards and working with thirdparties to ensure those are met. There obviously has to be a critical path which includes QA – obviously we'll be subject to the appropriate ratings and industry organisations which are different all over the world, and we'll have to comply with those, and we've got all that in place already for disc-based products, although the time to market for e-distributed games will be much quicker.

You've spoken about the advantages that Blu-ray offers in terms of being able to fit all the localised versions of a game on one disc. What implications does that have for region protection?
We expect most publishers will recognise the benefits of being region-free and just put all the content on the one disc. That's proven to be very successful on PSP, and we expect it to happen on PS3.

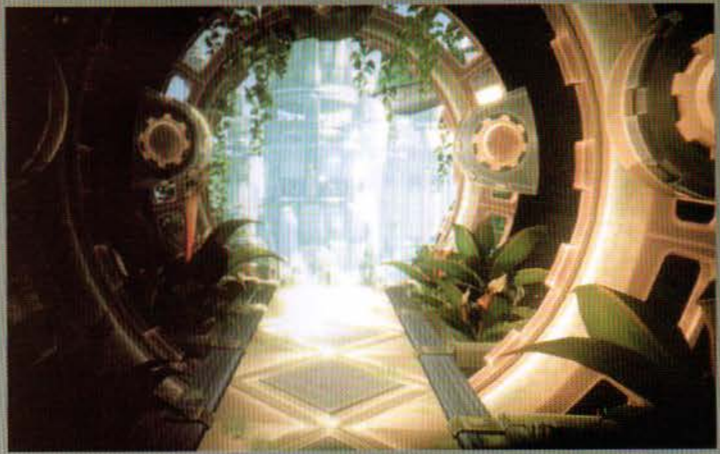
So all Sony-published games will be region-free?
Yeah. Our target – I'll say that at least – our target is to have PAL, NTSC, HD and all of the languages all on one disk, and it will be a single, global SKU, hopefully moving towards a global release date.

Communication forms a key part of the PS3 online vision, but there's quite a lot of evidence that the trend is moving away from that – it's commonplace for people playing 360 to routinely unplug their headsets because they don't like to talk to people – to strangers – while they play. Is it the case that communication doesn't sit as well with the gameplaying experience as some people think?
I think that's absolutely right, and what I was talking about was the communication being the enabling factor around the community, and that could sit inside the game environment but could as easily sit outside the game environment. And that's why friends lists become so important, because I only want to videochat with people I know and trust – my friends, my workmates, my family – and that's why I would point to something like MySpace as being a very important influence. That's what we're trying to show with *SingStar* and I hope you understood that vision. There are other games we could have used to show that path from package to media experience to network channel, but I thought that one was the most succinct. We noticed that trend when one of the development team on *SingStar* Googled for *SingStar* images, looking for a screenshot, and had actually found thousands of MySpace sites of people putting up pictures of their own *SingStar* parties, and that was the 'Bing!' – the lightbulb that went on, that people are already doing this in an improvised way and this was a way that we could bring it all back into an integrated process.



The evolution of Factor 5's *Lair* from glossy prototype continues. Expect the game to be prominent at E3, where Harrison claims PS3 demos will compare favourably to the teasers shown at last year's event

In terms of developer support, there are indications that there are far fewer small and medium-sized teams currently engaged in PS3 games than were on PS2 games at the same stage in its lifecycle. Is that really the case, and do you think the reasons commonly given for that – that the devkits are too expensive and there are anxieties about the costs of developing to PS3 standards – are real issues?
That was definitely part of the motivation behind the e-distribution initiative, to recognise that not every studio in the world is capable of creating a 50Gb Blu-ray disc epic with the level of fidelity of some of the things we showed at the keynote. But that's not to say that PS3 production is necessarily exponentially more expensive versus PS2. We're actually finding that, relative to the same period of time, it's actually cheaper to get things up and running on PS3 than it was on PS2.


More from Insomniac's next-gen *Ratchet & Clank* project. It's clear that, despite the inspired-by-real-life *MotorStorm* and *The Getaway* demos, Sony is also encouraging more 'traditional' game content on PS3

But when you talk to developers, that's not what they say. At the GDC keynote panel, the message was emphatically that costs are up and problematically so.
OK, there are two factors here. One factor is that salaries are going up, and the other factor is the amount of content that is being demanded by the consumer – the amount of art content. My comments were related to engineering costs where you talk about the number of programmers required to enable a certain amount of things to work onscreen. What we're finding is that the toolset on PlayStation 3 is so much more mature, and the programming skills needed are so much more general purpose, less specialised, that you can get more stuff happening quicker than on PS2. On PS2 what we did



was just open the machine up and say: 'There you go. Get on with it'. And although that's *exactly* what developers had asked of us after PS1, they didn't *really* mean it, and they sort of said after a few months: 'Actually, we didn't mean this at all', and we were like: 'Right. [Deep breath] OK...'

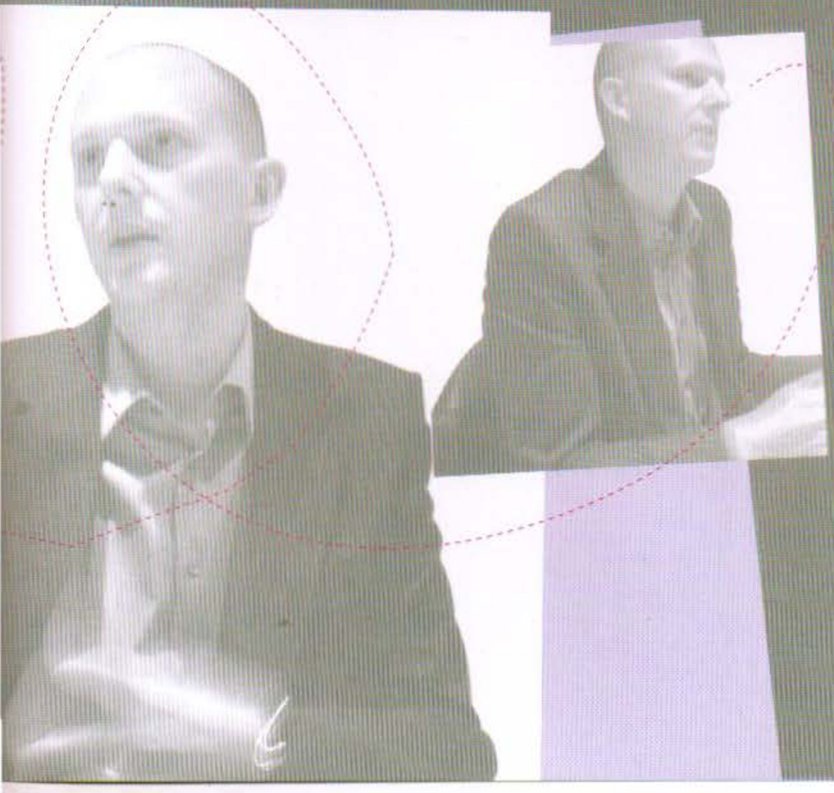
But aren't you responsible for creating that consumer demand for content, with things like last year's E3 demos? By promising so much aren't you creating a situation where you're making it incredibly difficult for developers to plan economical projects with lower asset requirements?
It's not a deliberate strategy, but yes, that's inevitable. We're in the entertainment business, we're in the business of delivering excitement, and great characters and great stories, and there is an inevitable arms race associated with our industry. Which is good because ultimately the consumer gets more for less – or for the same amount of money. But what we've done with this e-distribution initiative is to turn that on its head and allow that smaller scale innovation to happen on the biggest platform on the planet.

On the subject of those E3 demos, at this year's E3, when people are able to play these titles and see the imagery from this year and last year side by side, how well will the quality match up?
I think we've demonstrated that today. If you look at *Warhawk*, that was part of the presentation last year. *I-8*, what is now *Resistance: Fall Of Man*, that was there. With *MotorStorm* we didn't show the game, we just showed the technology, but you could see the underlying deformation systems, which is the key to that, and that's there now. So, come E3, I think it will be there. [Pause] *Killzone* is not a launch title anyway, and was never intended to be.

In issue 158 of Edge, Richard Huddy of ATI claimed that Xbox 360 is more capable of delivering the PS3 E3 demos than PS3 actually is. What's your response to that?
Tosh.

One of the things that your keynote emphasised was the extent of your lead over Microsoft and Nintendo. Do you get tired of the way the three hardware manufacturers are talked about in the same breath as if they all existed in the same order of magnitude?
I don't think we get tired of it. It's a fact of life. Whether or not we use the comparison, it's the press's job to use the comparison, because that's a great counterpoint for a story – a headline looks better when it has the word 'war' in it, or 'battle' in it, and we understand that. It's frustrating when that gets perpetuated, not by informed media like **Edge**, but by what I call the peripheral media which doesn't really understand the difference. So we just try to plough our own furrow, as we always have. We've never been distracted by our competitors.

"With MotorStorm we didn't show the game, we just showed the technology, the underlying deformation systems. But, come E3, I think the quality will be there"



You've said that, as market leader, it's your responsibility to innovate, but surely the bulk of what you showed today already exists in some form elsewhere?
I understand that that comment is always open to close scrutiny, but I think that the point I'm making about innovation is, don't judge us by what we launch the console with – because the audience that buys the console in year one is very different from the audience in year two, year five. Judge us by our strategic direction – we're moving in a much more ambitious direction, as I hope today showed.

You're the head of worldwide software development for the world's most dominant videogaming force. Who do you see as the most important man in gaming?
Ken Kutaragi.

Is that because hardware leads software?
No, he's not a hardware guy. What he does is he makes markets.



Thinking

With nearly all of his competitors' cards finally laid out on the table, Microsoft's Peter Moore explains the way forward for the first of the next generation

Peter Moore, Microsoft's corporate vice president, interactive entertainment business, entertainment and devices division, seems relaxed. Nintendo and Sony have just delivered keynote addresses at GDC, and neither appear to have given the former Sega Of America chief any cause to question his ambitious console strategy, so it's with much optimism that he's able to look forward to the future of Xbox 360. First, though, we have to clarify a few issues concerning the story so far.

Now that the dust has settled, what were the lessons learned from the first simultaneous worldwide console launch?

Well, 'lessons' always sounds like somehow you screwed up along the way, but we committed to do a global launch because we think that's the right thing to do, in particular for the European market where it seems that historically it's always been six to eight months behind – whether it's Japan or the US that's launched first. We just believe that Europe is too important a market to delay the launch and allow other regions to enjoy a console for six, eight months ahead. And particularly in the case of the connected world now, and the ability for gamers to be able to get up and running, get their Xbox Live accounts, get their Achievements built – it just seemed like the right thing to do.

And it was very difficult, of course, because not only are you localising your hardware and making sure that you coordinate – in this case – 16 countries in Europe, and of course Japan and the US and Canada, but also all the software to make sure that your launch titles are all ready to go, certified, that they meet all the ratings boards – again, particularly in Europe, where they are numerous, as you know

But having said all of that, we'd do it all over again. We think it's the right way to go – clearly our competitor agrees with us at this point, based on their announcements of the last week or so. This is a global economy, and again particularly when you're dealing in the world of connected state and building global communities, to in some way alienate much of that community that certainly we built with Xbox didn't seem like the right thing to do. Was it difficult, was it challenging, were people working 24 hours a day for probably the last six to eight months as we came up to November and December? Absolutely.

But now, as we sit here today, with Australia and New Zealand just having launched, 30 countries are enjoying Xbox 360, and Xbox Live is up all around the world on the new platform. I think it was exactly the right thing to do.

Do you think the shortages situation may have harmed the brand in a significant way?

No. I think people are disappointed but supply is continuing to flow in. I just actually looked at some of the



outside the box

European sell-through numbers this morning and you can see the uptake in supply meeting demand. It's difficult to do, and we did have some component shortages that caused difficulties, but as I'm fond of saying, it's a marathon, not a sprint. And while every console launch it seems has some issues at the beginning, it's really how fast you get up and running as you get to the next holiday – how many games you get, the quality of the games, in particular the second generation of software – and while it was disappointing that we couldn't fulfil complete demand, we did everything we could utilising airfreight. Now that seafreight is starting to flow through, and you get much larger quantities on boats than you can on airplanes, I think hopefully we'll put that behind us and we'll start meeting demand for the product.

Do you maintain that the technical issues experienced by early adopters fall within the expected volume?
Yes. Interestingly, we monitor [consumer] call rates, and that's an issue where there's been an incredibly dramatic drop-off, even though the installed base continues to grow. I mean, you have a complex consumer product that's connected to the internet where millions of people can talk and play with each other, so you're going to get some technical issues every now and again, but when we looked at the overall call rate against the defective rate, and also when we analyse the boxes that come in that needed repair or replacement, it's in the very low single digits, which consumer electronics finds very acceptable, particularly for a product of this complexity.

Do you think internet stories blew things out of proportion?
We call it the 12 Angry Men of the internet [laughs]. Something was happening last week with a UK site where somebody was complaining about something and it became an international issue. And when we looked – because, as I say, we can monitor the calls in realtime and watch bar graphs grow from what the call drivers are, as we call them – we just couldn't see anything. It's like a couple of people have a problem, they post it online, everybody else piles on, and it becomes an international incident. It really is the internet – millions of people own Xbox 360s but if four or five people have a problem it seems like the sky is falling.

Does that sort of internet activity become annoying after a while?
Well, I mean I love it, I love going on to the boards and the forums. Particularly being a Brit – I love the vociferousness of the British sites, and the no-holds-barred mentality, it just takes me back to my old high-school days. I like getting inside the heads of these folk. I don't know whether I'm looking at the words of an eight-year-old or a 28-year-old, but it does give you

realtime feedback, that's for sure. The challenge, at times, is when it affects the livelihoods of people, because all of a sudden, literally you've got people here who gave blood, sweat and tears for years to develop a product and get it out, and then when somebody has a problem and just trashes you and it gets picked up around the world, it can be demoralising. I guess that's the issue that I always worry about, for people who have really, really given their life to get this thing to market.

Everything you promised for Xbox 360 has been delivered, except for success in Japan. Is there anything you could've done differently?
Yeah, I mean obviously I'm responsible for Japan, I'm there a lot, I was there a couple of weeks ago. Japan is a longer time horizon for us. I wish we'd had more games on day one. We were disappointed, through nobody's fault, that *Dead Or Alive 4* wasn't there day one – I think that would've made a very large difference. I have just seen *Ninety-Nine Nights*, which is just finalised – I was in San Francisco the night before last, and Mizuguchi flew in to a showcase for editors. It looks spectacular, it ships next month in Japan, and I'm hopeful that it gives us an uplift. And perhaps most importantly I've spent a lot of time with Sakaguchi-san, and both *Blue Dragon* and *Lost Odyssey* will be the real test. It's early days. I'm disappointed that it's been a slow start, but we've built a five-year programme there with what I believe are the most relevant products that we could possibly build, which is roleplaying games by Sakaguchi for Japanese gamers built in Tokyo by Japanese developers. We're still yet to deliver those – *Blue Dragon* will ship this year, *Lost Odyssey* next year – and it's when those two titles are shipped that you can look at Japan and say it's been a success or it's been a failure.

It's always been something of a cliché that RPGs are popular in Japan, but a recent poll shows just how popular they remain. The preference for RPGs is astonishing.
It really is. And, y'know, we had only one slated for the first version of Xbox, *True Fantasy Live*, and it was an MMORPG, and that was probably a mistake, it was too ambitious – making MMOs is very complex. Y'know, hindsight is always 20:20, but you'd go back and do something meaningful in the RPG genre but not try and eat the elephant and do it as an MMO. And that's exactly what we're doing this time around. I just saw the latest build of *Blue Dragon* and the man is a genius. Combined with the talent that he's got, Toriyama-san in particular, who does the art...

Like I say, it's a slow start for us right now but we're in the market, we're fighting, *Ninety-Nine Nights* comes out next month, and then perhaps most importantly *Blue Dragon* at the end of the year and then *Lost Odyssey* in 2007. It's too early to write any epitaphs.

"We're definitely going to get a competitively priced external HD-DVD drive into the marketplace around the world this year"

Apparently many small-to-medium-sized Japanese developers don't yet have PS3 dev kits. How much of an opportunity exists there?
It's similar to a story I heard a couple of weeks ago. I think the challenge is that when you're on the condensed timeline that Sony clearly is, you for better or worse have to prioritise your devkits, because you're not getting the flow you would like, and the smaller guys are just not getting them. Clearly the Capcoms and the Konamis of this world, and the Activisions and EAs in the west, I'm sure they're getting their devkits, but when there's clearly a challenge in getting supply it's the smaller publishers and developers that struggle. And we're doing a lot of work over there with them, and they enjoy developing for 360 – hopefully that's of benefit to us. We'll see.

What are the plans for the release of a larger hard drive, the 360 camera, and the external HD-DVD drive? And how different is the strategy for releasing a more modular console?
No firm plans yet for the camera, but it's coming. We're just making sure that we have the support that we need either in-game or with communication applications. It's got to make sense. Just shipping a camera doesn't do anybody any good – we've already done that in Japan, and, while videochat for the Japanese market is pretty cool, you've still got to work out what the business model is, and I think that clearly we have to make sure that there are real game applications that make innovative use of the camera. The usual stuff you can do, maybe digitally mapping your face in the game, has already been done, and we'd certainly be able to check the box on that, but going forward we've got to make sure that we're really looking at innovative things to do. So until we're ready to do that we're not going to make any announcements about the camera.

The HD-DVD drive, the external drive, is still on target for this year. The announcement I made at CES stands firm: we look at what we believe will be the behaviour of consumers who want HD movie playback and if they want that we're definitely going to get a competitively priced external drive into the marketplace around the world, and do it this year. HD-DVD standalone movie players are shipping here in the US in the next couple of weeks, at $499, and some of the studios are now releasing hi-def movies. Blu-ray seems to be a lot further behind and potentially twice as expensive. The format wars continue. From our point of view, when we look at price being more sensitive, particularly in the European market, burdening the [base Xbox 360] box with an HD drive didn't seem a smart idea for us, particularly in markets where hi-def TVs are still in the minority of homes rather than the majority. So the drive will be great, certainly in my house – it will be of a size so you can plug it in if you want to watch an HD movie, and if you don't, from what I'm seeing, you can probably put it in the drawer and use it later on. $500 for another box to sit next to my TV? I'll probably wait for the drive and plug it into my 360.

A larger hard drive? No plans yet – we're waiting to see how things develop down the line.

It makes a lot of sense, though, with the popularity of Xbox Live Arcade on Xbox 360 and demo downloads, and so on.
Yes, I mean when you look at Xbox Live Arcade, even though with some compression technologies we're managing to get that stuff into real





Following a successful career in the sports shoe industry, Moore became chairman at Sega Of America, before joining Microsoft in January '03

bite-sized entertainment, down the road, absolutely, you've got to be able to. It's very simple, and that's clearly why it's a detachable hard drive. As more and more of the content we're producing in hi-def – such as the Epic Records arrangement, with Natasha Bedingfield, which turned out to be a lot more popular than even we expected – you're downloading hi-def video to the hard drive, and yes, ultimately we've got to look at [the larger hard drive], but it's early days.

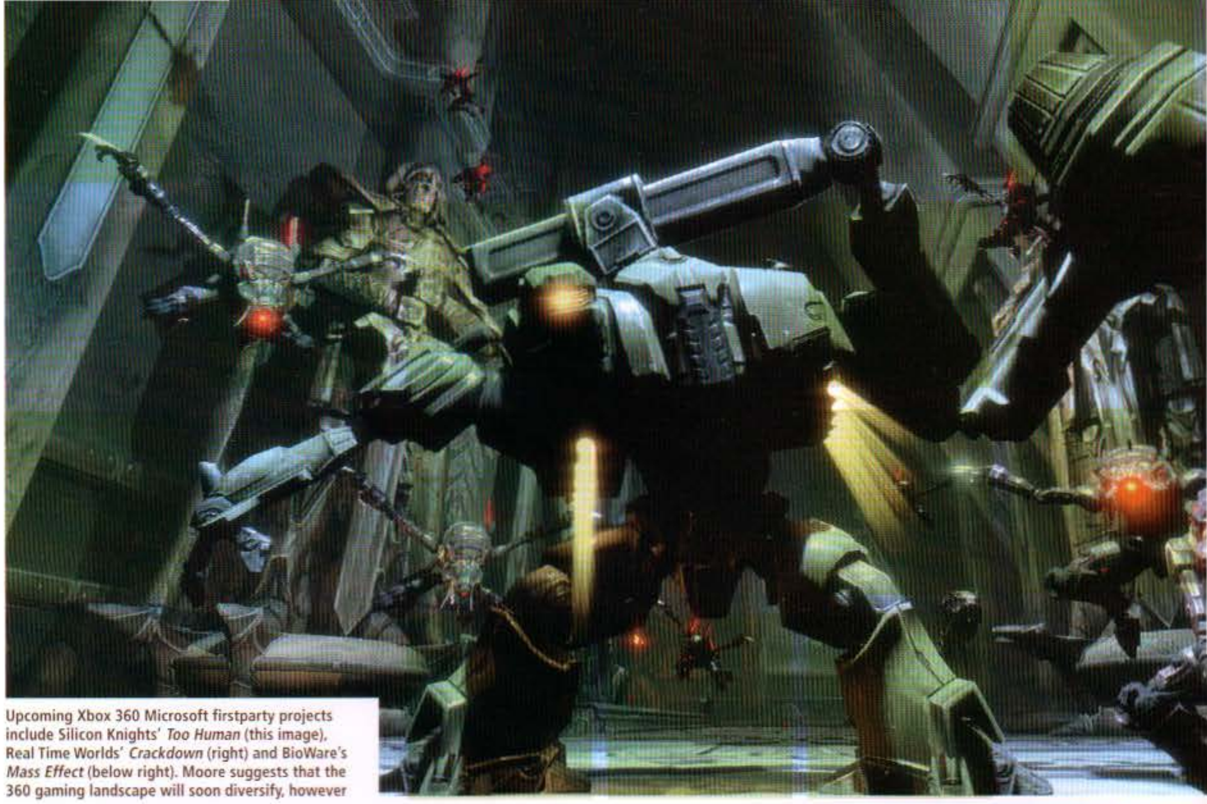
What did you think about the GDC keynotes from Sony and Nintendo, and why didn't Microsoft deliver one this year?
We certainly could've. J gave a keynote that sounded awfully familiar to what Phil said, certainly in the online world, except the biggest difference is that we're actually now delivering on it. The keynote for Sony seemed weird because it was a rehash primarily of what Kutaragi had said in Tokyo the week before. I don't know whether Kutaragi's meeting was hastily arranged, and whether Phil had his legs cut from underneath him – whether the plan was that he would announce all of this and then that suddenly changed. But I've not seen the demos, I didn't actually go to the keynote, so I'm waiting to see the demos themselves – the playable demos, anyway. It seems like that was really the only thing that Kutaragi didn't show, so until I see them it's difficult for me to comment. But I didn't hear a lot of news that I hadn't already heard when I was in Tokyo the week before. Certainly there was a little bit more detail on Sony's online service plans but nothing that shocked me that I hadn't either assumed or had heard from Kutaragi.

And then with Iwata-san again I'd already left GDC, but it seemed that everybody is now jumping on the back-catalogue, digital-download model and they're going to have Sega and HudsonSoft committed to making back-catalogue available. All very interesting, and I guess it validates some of the work we've already got in the marketplace, again with Arcade and Xbox Live Marketplace itself, allowing downloads. It's going to be interesting to see, in the case of the Revolution, how that's going to be facilitated – a hard drive, how big it is, etc. So I think people keep their powder dry until E3. I didn't see an awful lot of stuff. I think the challenge now for Sony is that they're shipping this year and gamers should be able to walk up to their booth and get their hands on relatively polished games and play them on the showfloor in Los Angeles in five to six weeks from now. We shall see.

What is your response to Sony's global rollout plan? Do you have any words of advice?
[Laughs] Well, it's not easy, we've probably proven that. It's an incredibly aggressive thing to do. Clearly we've changed the paradigm – we launched globally in November and that's exactly what our competitor intends to do. I find it particularly interesting – I was at the ELSPA conference in London last June and my good friend [SCEE boss] David Reeves said that Europe will always come last because it doesn't want to deal with buggy hardware and it wants to make sure that the games are all polished – and voila, here we are, day and date. So we shall see. The proof of the pudding is in the tasting on this one. Their ramp projections are incredibly aggressive – it's very difficult to project out this far ahead what your yields of silicon will be, and how many drives for an unproven format you can deliver. And a million a month is quite a challenging target, but they're a great company and a formidable competitor and I'm sure they're going to give it their best try. It's not easy.

How are you ramping up your digital-distribution activity, and how long will it be before Microsoft begins selling full-price games via download?
Well, retail is still very important in the equation, and full-price games via download, if I look at a full-price game's filesize right now, that's 6Gb, so I think it's very important we keep the mix of how we distribute our content. Our retail partners around the world play a very important role in the distribution channel, in getting hardware out, in making software available in great selections, having shopfloor clerks that can speak about the games and guide consumers to what games they should buy – it's a very important role that isn't going away. We think we've found the right balance with things like Arcade as well as the Marketplace making demos and trailers available for download. I would be very surprised if full games are

available for download in even the medium-term future. We like the idea of what you might call an impulse purchase of an arcade game – I'm sure you've played games like *Geometry Wars*, *Zuma* and *Mutant Storm*. We think that's the right balance in the business model – our retailers are very, very important, it's not our intention at all to encroach on their business. At the same time I think they recognise the fact that digital distribution is coming in the future but it's going to be gated by the consumer's ability to have that fat pipe come to their home and the availability of huge hard drives. Even the hard drive that Sony has lined up for PS3 is ultimately insufficient to do what they've announced. Incidentally, I was confused by Sony talking about Blu-ray – large media storage on disc – being the future, and then immediately flipping it to digital distribution – which actually doesn't need a disc – being the future, so I've got to read Phil's presentation again just to understand how that fits together. Ultimately I think we're all toying with [digital distribution]. As a company we're four years into the inception of Xbox Live and what it means to consumers – over 50 per cent of our consumers around the world are now connected to Live. We've now seen 10m downloads of digital content recorded over Live, and it continues to grow. We've built out the technical backbone of this thing over the past few years, and again, that is not easy to do. So it will all be about balance and it will all be about making sure that all of us in the ecosystem can share in the business and not lock out one versus the other.



Upcoming Xbox 360 Microsoft firstparty projects include Silicon Knights' *Too Human* (this image), Real Time Worlds' *Crackdown* (right) and BioWare's *Mass Effect* (below right). Moore suggests that the 360 gaming landscape will soon diversify, however

So, what happens for Xbox 360 between now and the PS3 launch in November?

Ship, ship, ship, ship, ship. I mean, the flow is improving enormously. Here in the US it's my belief that next weekend, with the flow that I'm seeing, you should be able to walk in a store and pick up a 360 off the shelf. Again, going back to my commentary on boats, you can get a lot of consoles in 40ft containers, and clearly there's a window of opportunity for us to continue to meet demand.

We've got some great games arriving now. *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter*. *Elder Scrolls* is unbelievable. And then of course Lara Croft's going to ship on 360 next month. *Dead Rising* coming along from Capcom has got a lot of people excited. There's a *ton* of great software coming up. From a firstparty point of view, *Gears Of War*, which you'll be able to play at E3, I think has the potential to be the game of the year. So our focus is completely on continuing to meet demand, continuing to deliver great software, continuing to deliver a great online experience, building catalogues of arcade games – which seem to have been for many people the killer app for the 360; I'm not sure if that's good news or bad news [chuckles], but people love it, and it's attracting a broad demographic. And then focusing on growing the installed base. *Viva Piñata*, from the boys up in Twycross, caught a lot of people by surprise – a lot of people are excited that it's reminiscent of the glory days of Rare – and it's something we need to do as a company to broaden the reach of the Xbox from beyond what you might call the hardcore gamer. As an industry we need to bring in people who ordinarily maybe wouldn't consider a console purchase, and an innovative game like *Viva Piñata* certainly has the chance to do that.

It's interesting, though, that your line-up includes *Gears Of War*, *Too Human*, *Halo 3*, *Crackdown* and *Mass Effect*, which are aimed as the established hardcore gamer. If you looked at just those games you would say that Xbox 360 is aimed very much at that group.

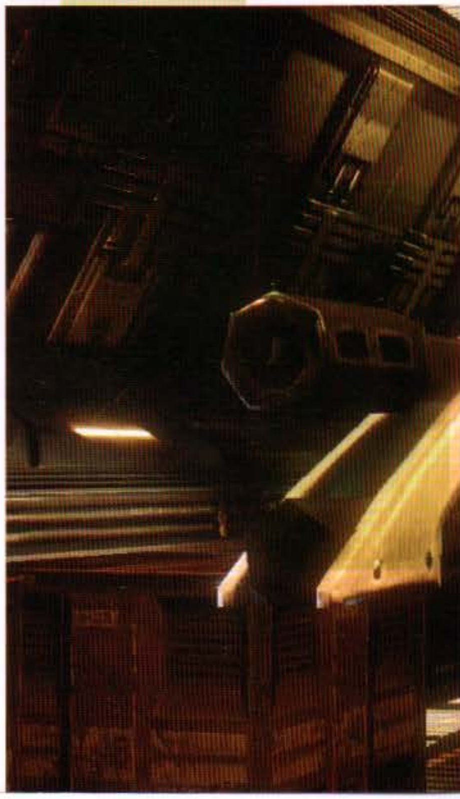
Are you happy with that profile?

Well, of course all you're referring to with that list are firstparty games – let's not forget the balance that thirdparty developers…

But surely the firstparty games are responsible, to a large degree, for defining the platform.

Well, absolutely. And in the early going it is that guy who's willing to spend £300-400 in building his system and that guy is typically 25/26/27 years of age, and while *Viva Piñata* may interest him, he's more interested in diving into deep RPGs or playing firstperson shooters or action adventure games. That's just the nature of the mix as you segment your consumers going along. We're potentially taking a huge risk in shipping *Viva Piñata* within a year of the launch of the platform. Here's a game that's quite frankly as attractive to an eight-year-old as it is a 28-year-old – some would argue that it's too early. But, as you say, we define the platform, and we have a lot more announcements to make at E3 about what I'll call broader content going forward. At the same time, remember, games like *PGR3* and *Kameo* are also available. *Kameo* is still selling well, and as a broader consumer comes into the marketplace, *Kameo*'s still going to be on the shelf – it's a timeless game, and typically it might even be there at a better pricepoint. So it's not just about what's coming up but how you build a portfolio from day one. We're also doing a lot of work with thirdparties to make sure that we









continue to build out the portfolio with broader content, and you're going to see some announcements along those lines at E3.

You recently said that there'll be fewer firstparty games of a better quality on 360 than there were on Xbox, which makes it sound like you're concerned about the scale of development nowadays. Just how big is that concern?

Well, certainly as we continue to promise the consumer hi-def experiences and tremendous sound design, and Hollywood actors as voice talent, and 30-40 hours of gameplay, and supporting the bandwidth of continuous online play, the expense of the industry needs to be watched very carefully. XNA, which was part of our focus at GDC, will be our attempt to try and mitigate some of those costs. But one of the things that counterbalances all of this is Xbox Live Arcade. We're encouraging gamers to go look at games that cost only four or five dollars, and also encouraging developers to look at this as a way, for some of them, to monetise their back catalogue. And what I hope will happen is that very small developers have a publishing opportunity here where let's say a team of five or six guys working with a few hundred thousand dollars has the ability to get a game published on Xbox 360. So, yes, I have concerns for the guys who have to sign all the purchase orders and write the cheques for game development, and that's why placing bigger bets on fewer games is better than throwing mud against the wall and hoping a lot of it sticks – it's more of a focused approach to getting more hits and less misses. It's not different to Hollywood – it's a hits and misses business. You've got to find financial formulas to try and guarantee more hits than misses, and that's what we're doing.

Talking of Hollywood and indie development, what's the Brokeback Mountain on 360, or doesn't such a thing exist?

Well, if you're referring to Brokeback Mountain as an indie, low-budget movie rather than a gay cowboy movie, I think it'll exist on Arcade...

Half of me says I should try to do something that is tantamount to the indie film industry and do a Sundance. I mean, what is the videogame version of Sundance or the Cannes film festival? Because we've now got the distribution method vehicle for these things... For better or worse, Hollywood is still dominated by the Dreamworks, the Universal Studios, the Paramounts, and it's a shame that the Miramaxes have kind of been swallowed up and gone away. But there clearly seems to be that opportunity for a Brokeback Mountain to break through if the storyline is as different and innovative and filmed as beautifully as that movie is. And if the game is different, innovative and crafted as well as a number of games are that I'm starting to see that are in concept stages, it's going to come from somewhere, and we'd certainly encourage that, and finance that as we're currently doing by providing a platform and a distribution vehicle in Xbox Live Arcade.

Getting back to competing consoles, it seems that some people want to hold off from buying a 360 and wait to see what PS3 offers, in much the same way that a lot of people held off from buying Dreamcasts because of the promises Sony made for PS2. Is that frustrating?

A little bit. The Dreamcast question for me is obviously unique because I was the guy who launched it here in the US and had to live through that period of time. And now, being at Microsoft for the Xbox 360 launch, when you lay out the completely different situation between where we are today and where Sega was with the Dreamcast, coming off a pretty disastrous period of time with the Saturn having been pulled from the market...

Just to clarify, we're not likening Microsoft to Sega – this is more a question of Sony's...

...tactics of trying to freeze the market in advance. It was very clear to us three years ago that that would happen. And, going back to my earlier comment, the best way to deal with that is to continue to fulfill demand until they get into the marketplace. We'll have to see how big our installed global base lead will be, how good our second-generation software will be, how many games we will have, how even more evolved Xbox Live will be, before they ship their first console. They're also putting other codependencies such as Blu-ray around it. If Blu-ray doesn't win the format wars, I'd say that was a little bit of a challenge for PlayStation 3. To say the least.

"The best way to deal with Sony's tactics is simply to continue to fulfill demand for Xbox 360 until they get into the marketplace"

How is J Allard's progress going with Microsoft's forthcoming handheld console?

[Laughs] J is actually still very busy. He runs the platform team for Xbox. We continue to build out the system, to build out Xbox Live in particular – he's got hundreds of guys working on Live right now. We don't just lock down the code for the software on Live and then just walk away. There's so much work to be done, particularly as we move to much larger installed bases. And particularly with Sony's announcement, let's face it, we need to stay on our toes. So that's what J's up to.

It seems strange that he's completely out of the public eye now, though, in contrast to before, when he was very much in it.

We've reorganised what we do. I can see his car from my office – he's certainly in my eye [laughs]. But, as is typical with somebody that crunched the way he did, he took a bit of time off. He's a very avid snowboarder, he took a little bit of time off to do some snowboarding, because that's the time of year it is here in the Pacific Northwest. But he's still very busy – as I say, he's got hundreds of people working on the platform...

This is the new Microsoft handheld platform, right?

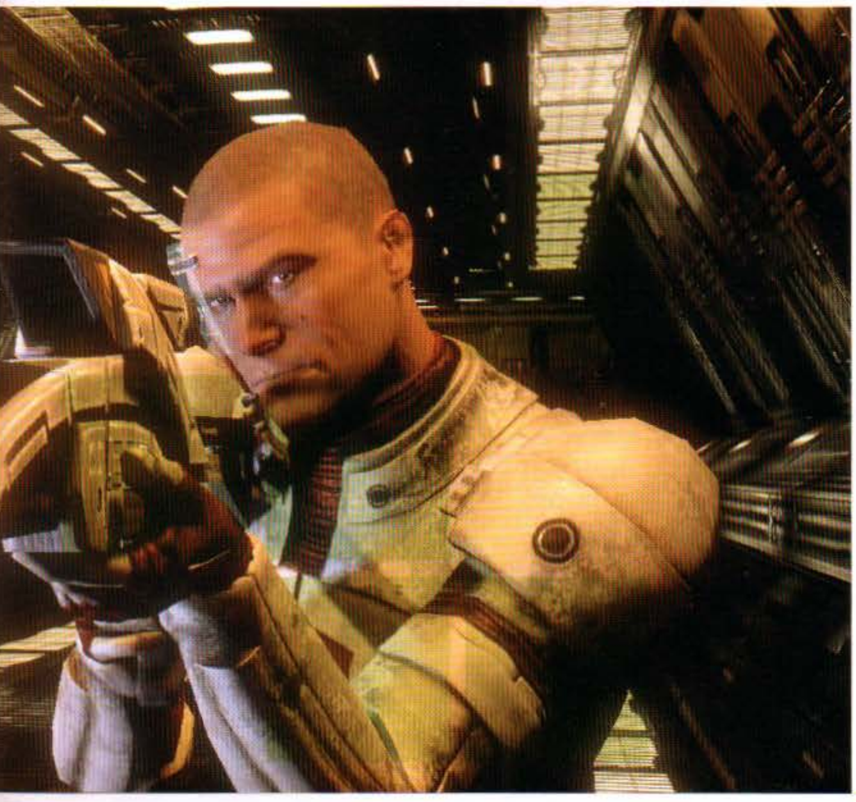
Ha ha!

That's officially 'no comment'?

Clearly!

OK, final question: who is the most important man in gaming?

Boy... It's a very good question. I think... I don't know. One would argue that, with the pressure now on Sony as a corporation, and the reliance upon the PlayStation delivering what it needs to do for the financial health of the Sony corporation, and on the amount of codependencies that PlayStation 3 has, not only as a gaming platform, but also for Cell technology and Blu-ray... 'Important' is probably not quite the right word but certainly the person that everybody's focused on is Kutaragi. In my humble opinion.



ART AND

Suppose the agonising of the videogame industry really has reached saturation point, the professional life-and-death concerns of its creative minds worthy of countless sobering pages. What time is this for nostalgia? What could recollections of Liverpool-based publisher Psygnosis, for instance, show us beyond the base comparison of how adventurous the industry was once and how obstinate it's said to be now? For an answer, try asking instead what it taught *them*. A community of developers nurtured by the publisher throughout their formative years now stands at the forefront of the modern industry in spite of its chilling climate. Someone must have taught them something.

Were you to include those talents' subsequent works in a removal of Psygnosis from gaming history, it would leave quite a hole in the industry we know today. At the height of presumptuousness, you could suggest the non-existence of not only the immediate descendents – Bizarre Creations, Creative Assembly, Traveller's Tales, Sony Studio Liverpool and Reflections – but also those further down the line such as Rockstar (arguably built upon the success of DMA's *Grand Theft Auto*), Real Time Worlds (founded by DMA chief David Jones), BigBig (fathered by Psygnosis founder **Ian Hetherington** in more recent years) and, of course, Hetherington's own Evolution. Were you to switch to considering IP instead of companies, then the implications would speak for themselves.

PSYENCE

THE INDUSTRY MIGHT NEVER SEE ITS KIND AGAIN, BUT HOW MUCH OF PSYGNOSIS LIVES ON IN THE TALENT IT TOOK UNDER ITS WING?

Hetherington describes the Psygnosis development philosophy as "foster talent, yield product," and few of the people interviewed here dispute that claim. "They all came to me with the germ of an idea," he begins, "a half-baked demo on an Amiga or an ST. When I first encountered **Martyn Chudley** [who would later found Bizarre Creations], he was doing *The Killing Game Show*. In order to make that a viable commercial proposition, we loaned him an ST hard drive that allowed him to develop the game to the point where it was demonstrable. Then we could go into the production phase."





Each dipping into a different realm of mid-to-late-'80s fantasy and science fiction, the Psygnosis boxes of the pre-*Lemmings* era offered a consistency of theme and quality that modern publishers, with their market calling the shots, would be hard pushed to equal. Rarely did their artwork, airbrushed by the likes of Roger Dean and Peter Andrew Jones, directly mirror the visual design of the attached games. Many developers, however, would assimilate their broad sentiment and style

"I was doing all my development on one machine," Chudley recalls, "running, compiling, debugging and just using floppy disks. So Ian provided me with the hard drive to help set up a development environment, compiling on the ST for the Amiga. It sped up development by a factor of about a thousand."

"Martyn's break into the business," says Hetherington, "came from recognising that he had something in himself – work ethic, talent, etc – and giving him space and resource, telling him not to worry about where the next rental payment was coming from for his flat and saying to him: 'Just write us a game'."

Reflections founder **Martin Edmonson** remembers the early days: "Psygnosis was a small, close-knit family of developers. Every new developer that started working on a game for them tended to work on a second or third and so on. We showed them a very early demo of *Shadow Of The Beast* and Ian and co decided to back it heavily despite the fact that the ST was then outselling the Amiga by five to one. I could see many other publishers saying: 'Yeah, that looks fantastic, but can you give us an ST version first, please?'"

Again, Traveller's Tales founder **Jon Burton**'s story is similar: "When we first approached Psygnosis, all we had was a basic demo of *Leander* with one creature – a dragon. Ian obviously saw potential in what we had done and offered to take the project on the spot. We actually said we would like to come back in a month so that we were sure we could make the game all that we thought it could be. The lack of content in the original demo showed Ian's ability to spot talent from just talking with developers and seeing their ideas."

Then there's **Nick Burcombe**, original designer of *Wipeout*: "In 1987, I was invited by Jonathan [Ellis – co-founder of Psygnosis] and Ian to do some testing during the school holidays to earn some extra cash. 'Paid for playing games? Are they mad?' I thought. I couldn't believe my luck. I got permanent employment in 1989 as the company's first in-house tester. To be honest, I didn't have a clue what the job meant or really what was expected of me, I was making it up as I went along. There were no processes in place – no reporting structures and certainly nothing as sobering as the now-familiar TRCs [technical requirements checklist]. My job description was simple: 'Play the game to destruction' and, with the limited technical vocabulary of an industry novice, try to describe where it crashed.

"In the sense that it always created its own IP, Psygnosis was fostering talent and yielding product right from day one with *Brataccas*. Despite the playability of its early games being







Left, from top: Nick Burcombe of SCEE Studio Liverpool; Jon Burton, founder of Traveller's Tales; Ian Hetherington, co-founder of Evolution and BigBig; Martin Edmonson, co-founder of Reflections; Martin Chudley, founder of Bizarre Creations

questionable, at least the cash was coming directly back to the company and not into the pockets of a thirdparty. This allowed Psygnosis to continue to foster its talent in-house, and in later days when thirdparty developers were also delivering big sellers, the company nurtured them as best it could while continuing to develop in-house skills."

"I never felt we were barred from doing any kind of product – we'd happily take on anything," says Hetherington. "When developers know that's your philosophy and know that you're supportive, you do tend to attract excellence and we were fortunate enough to do that."

Looking at the homogeny of Psygnosis' portfolio, specifically prior to the success of *Lemmings*, it's hard to believe that the only assets the publisher invested in its developers were money, resources and vital recognition. For the analogy of it being the trunk of a surviving family tree to stick, the company would have to have offered something inheritable, an ethos.

That was its purposefully elusive quality during the formative years. Beyond the high-gloss, four-piece packaging and barely legible logo, the company's brand values were a mystery, a fog of technical excellence, ostentatious storytelling (though seldom beyond the manual) and unpredictable quality of central game design. But for a company that

QUANTUM THEORIES

For an illustration of the change in attitudes that Psygnosis bridged, look no further than the ill-fated sequel to Burcombe's early Xbox racer, *Quantum Redshift*. "Having *QR2* dropped was a real eye-opener," he admits. "Any romantic ideas of being able to flourish or even survive as a 'small but cost-effective' developer went out the window. I thought we'd be an attractive proposition for a publisher if we could keep headcount down and deliver product on time, but it's not enough. From the safe seclusion of ten years at Psygnosis/ Sony, we stepped outside, got a couple of titles under our belts and were faced with a very simple truth: *Redshift* simply didn't sell enough and didn't have enough IP value to warrant a sequel. At Psygnosis in the old days, 350,000 units would have been enough to bring out the platinum-plated, diamond-encrusted, disposable champagne glasses, had there been such things, but clearly this isn't the case these days."



"THE BRAND WAS MIXED UP. WHAT WAS IN OUR CONTROL, AT LEAST, WAS PACKAGING, SO WE WENT FOR A DISTINCTIVE LOOK"

worked exclusively with its own IP, as Hetherington explains, the foremost concern at the time was identity: "The concept of brand was mixed up – people didn't know if the brand was the game, the publisher or the developer. What was in our control, at least, was the packaging, so we went for a distinctive look. Of course, you have to back that up with the product, and with a pretty disparate bunch of developers, how do you garner and maintain some level of product quality? I think we became synonymous with being technology-led, and sometimes we were led by it too much. But we were also fortunate – everyone has their bad ones and everyone has their super-product."

Remembrance of that early portfolio might seem a welcome reprieve from today's anxieties of licensing run amok, but even during the late '80s a company that created rather than bought its ideas was at an increasing disadvantage.

"When you were looking at Ocean Software [a company that Burcombe rightfully describes as "recycling code and changing graphics to fit any IP they could get their hands on"] and Mirrorsoft," Hetherton continues, "they were all about risk: if you buy the right licence and get a half-decent development team, you mitigate risk. For retailers in those days it was an easy sell to say you had WWF or Robocop – it greased the wheels and they felt comfortable. Of course, every time we sold a product, the risk clock was reset. No one had any idea what the next one off the production line would be."

As the company motifs took hold, however, at least from a visual standpoint, that latter concern became less immediate. Expectations formed around the boxart, largely bought from and outsourced to fantasy artists Roger Dean, brother Martin and their peers, and in-game content that tallied frequently with their

imagery. Was that assimilation of style intentional? "Actually, in the case of *Shadow Of The Beast*," explains Edmonson, "it just happened that I was a huge fan of Roger Dean's art. The reason our games looked so similar in the early days was that the quality and style was one to aspire to. It was more us wanting that look ourselves than being pushed into it. In terms of design, Psygnosis left everyone to their own devices. I can't remember an occasion when Ian or anyone there tried to impose some look or design decision on us."

"The developers would see the imagery that was going around day in and day out," Hetherington recalls. "They probably didn't know any better [than to mimic it] and neither did we. But if their games adopted some of its characteristics then it was fine, really."

It's Burcombe's belief that the two-way street of external and in-game visual design was inevitable, and that when everything soon changed for Psygnosis, it did so at the right time: "Thankfully, the Psygnosis identity and branding had been very well established long before any departures in an artistic sense or packaging direction were taken. But as an indicator of how important the package identity was, I remember the letters of outcry when the interior boxes for the games were changed to the plain brown cardboard coloured 'pizza-box' with the tabbed top and bottom outer sleeve. A handful of very angry customers were horrified, but from a cost point of view it must have saved a fortune. That decision was possibly – and understandably – taken after *Lemmings* had sold a million."

And little needs to be said about that. Ported to over 30 platforms following its release in 1991, the puzzler slipped effortlessly into gaming's collective consciousness and instantly overshadowed not only DMA Design's earlier Psygnosis titles – *Menace* and *Blood Money* – but for the first time the publisher's brand image as well.



"It was initially called *Robodragon*," recalls Chudley of *The Killing Game Show*. "I could afford five floppies to send out – thankfully one of them was to Psygnosis. It was the end of their budget year, and as I was so cheap – asking £500 per month, but actually only invoicing for it every two – they could afford to take me on"



Between them, the Psygnosis representatives in this early-era gathering would ship over 100 million units. Third from left is Martin Edmonson, with Creative Assembly founder Tim Ansell fifth from left, and Studio 33 (now part of EA Northwest) founder John White next in line. Then comes Hetherington, to the right of whom is Russell Kay, founder of Dundee's now-defunct independent Visual Science. Finally, fourth from right, is *Lemmings* and *GTA* creator David Jones, chairman of Real Time Worlds

"Once Psygnosis produced *Lemmings*, I think they realised they could sell games based on gameplay rather than image," notes Burton. "Although *Leander* fitted well with the Roger Dean era, *Puggsy* would never have been signed pre-*Lemmings*."

Identification of the company's core values comes from observing that post-*Lemmings* change. How Psygnosis acted on day one may have been cloaked in manufactured mystique, but its fervour when harvesting a bumper crop, marked here by titles such as Chudley's *Wiz 'n' Liz* and Traveller's Tales' aforementioned *Puggsy*, reveal much about its opportunistic acumen. While a scattering of releases sustained its early image beyond 1991, the desire to capitalise on audiences such as that of the newly launched Mega Drive was as evident as it was commercially sound, and was soon repeated on an altogether grander scale.

"The interesting thing was that culturally we were trying to grow the influence of our products, and that probably made *Wipeout* the best thing we ever did," says Hetherington of the game that helped galvanise Sony's PlayStation in the eyes of most early adopters. "We very consciously said: 'How do we take this to the mass market and get outside of the nerdy teenager market and get cool?' It was the complete product for me in terms of positioning."

When Psygnosis became the property of Sony in 1993 (see 'PSY'), its eminently recognisable brand, already transfigured to the point where only a feathered face remained, was on borrowed time. But it was a while, notes Chudley, before the weight of the Japanese giant's modern practices came to bear: "That was still the 'good old days' of their philosophy, where Psygnosis' trust in a developer was more important to them than glossy design docs, cashflow projections, risk assessment plans, etc. For example, as a fledgling team of just five people starting out on PlayStation, we were offered the F1 contract purely off the back of our relationship and my passion for F1 racing. Can you imagine that happening nowadays?

"We felt the end was coming a few years later, though. It was typified when we heard about the huge delivery of BMW cars for 'the new middle management layer'. The culture was changing too, and developers had no contact with Ian any more, just a team of people who felt development could be formularised and coded 'by numbers', which many Psygnosis developers couldn't identify with."

"ONCE PSYGNOSIS PRODUCED LEMMINGS, THEY REALISED THEY COULD SELL GAMES BASED ON GAMEPLAY RATHER THAN IMAGE"

Hetherington concurs, juxtaposing the industry before and after the sea change in which he clearly played his part: "It was about giving people the freedom to do what they were good at. You just don't get that in a risk-averse industry. If you look at Real Time Worlds now, they have eight producers on their game. That's fine – I can cope with that as a procedural technique – but where's the added value? The big problem with publishers today is that they reduce risk without adding value, and it's never the developer's risk. The industry isn't going anywhere in that state."

Which is why you might want to talk about Psygnosis and indulge in some wistful reminiscence. Few people are better equipped to make that nostalgia relevant to today's industry than those who saw its seemingly idyllic

model of game development transform into today's micromanaged goliath. For an insight into whether the idea of a publisher brand, not to mention that of a publisher driven by its developers, has become truly unsustainable, these are the people to approach.

"The synapse between the developer and the consumer has been lost," Hetherington states. "What's in between now is a sponge, absorbing risk and creating lowest-common-denominator product – just what this industry doesn't need. In that scenario, the developer becomes nothing more than work for hire."

"I got the distinct impression that what Microsoft wanted to hear from us was 'Big ideas, blue sky, 60+ people and massive budgets'," says Burcombe of Curly Monsters, his post-Psygnosis studio that created Xbox racer *Quantum Redshift* and saw his preconceptions shattered. "But realistically we weren't ready for that. I felt we were a little like old-school developers and while we did prove our point – the point that a team of eight people could still make a game on time and to budget instead of the 30-person teams of which six did 90 per cent of the work – it was just that, a point proven and not a serious business plan about where we would be five years from then.

"Perhaps the very involved, tolerant and patient relationships that Psygnosis fostered with small developers had led me to expect more loyalty when things didn't go to plan. I think I wanted to believe that a publisher would nurture us in the same way Psygnosis had nurtured so many developers back in the day. But of course that's no way for a large publisher to conduct its business these days – it's far too personal."

"When you go to a Microsoft or Sony with a new proposition," Hetherington believes, "the process you go through is excruciating. What you really want these people to say is: 'We know you, we trust you. Make us a game'. That doesn't happen because the pendulum has swung to the marketing side and they just cannot make that decision or identify that kind of talent. They certainly won't trust them. What you end up with is *Grand Theft Auto* but different, but not too different."

Citing the example of *Beyond Good & Evil*, we ask Hetherington if he believes the lack of publisher brand images such as Psygnosis' now contributes to the commercial failure of promising new IP. "Without doubt, it's a factor. If no publisher has a brand image and every new IP has zero momentum on day one, then it's entirely down to that publisher to create it. The problem is that if you take a sales-force backwards approach, where you obtain a forecast, derive a marketing budget and ignore





Recognising the broader markets available to an established publisher and spurred by the enormous success of *Lemmings*, Psygnosis followed that game's release with a diverse range of '90s titles. While delayed projects such as *Aquaventura*, together with technically courageous flagships such as 1993's *Microcosm*, sustained the former themes that had paired so well with the company's logo, there was little doubt that its strict adherence to those of exotic fantasy was being shed



Psygnosis saw the gradual decline of its brand image once Sony took office. Despite the characteristic futurism of *Wipeout*, the company's line-up reflected both the restrictive nature of standardised jewel cases and the need for more identifiable, market-friendly IP. Complete absorption into the manufacturer's internal studio structure would soon follow, its UK operations becoming SCEE Studios Liverpool, Camden, Stroud and Leeds

completely the fact that it's a brand new IP that may or may not create a franchise, then the marketing money is simply not there. It's a self-fulfilling prophecy, and there's a graveyard of games that have fallen foul."

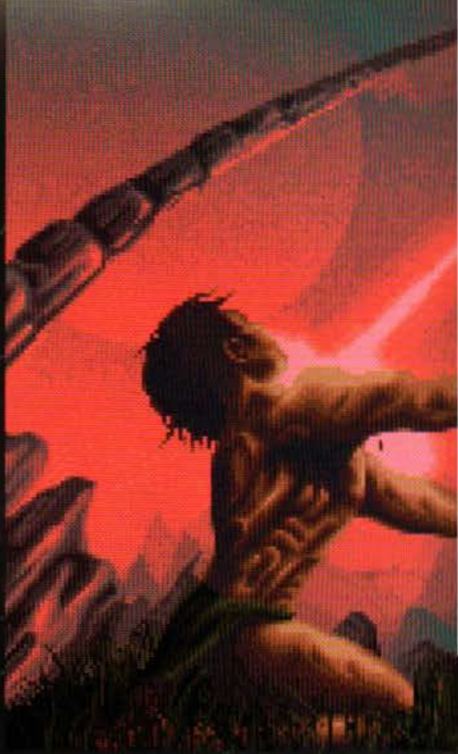
So is a Psygnosis-style publisher sustainable today? "Only online, " believes Hetherington. "Distribution now has become attuned to what it's been fed for that last ten years. For a new IP which will then become a franchise, getting about three turns per format lifecycle along with downloads and the like, the critical issue is how many marketing dollars iteration *one* attracts. For a publisher, that's a very difficult decision, and one they're not very good at making."

"Psygnosis was originating everything from scratch," notes Burcombe, "and that's too risky these days. It's no longer like the bad old days of the 'The Wild Waste' where it seemed that every game stood an equal chance of making money and everyone in publishing got behind everything because there was precious little choice. Now it's simply too expensive to get it wrong.

"These days only a handful of developers are strong enough to generate good longterm IPs. If you stumble across a Valve or a Bungie on your travels then strike while the iron is hot. But remember: Bungie were developing on Mac when Microsoft collared them, so it seems that even the best developers need business guidance at times."

Yet Chudley offers a more optimistic appraisal, and one that gives the Redmond corner unexpected, no pun intended, kudos (though admittedly he *is* head of one its most valued development partners). "Actually, the nurturing principles that worked so well at Psygnosis – adapting to the developer, providing the support where it's needed, leaving well alone where it's not and working to achieve a real partnership – *do* work well nowadays. That's what makes Microsoft such a good publishing partner – they have embraced the core philosophies that made Psygnosis great. However, with multimillion-pound development deals, the days of offering deals on a whim, not signing a contract until after the game is finished – but still paying all along – and developing on trust are long gone."

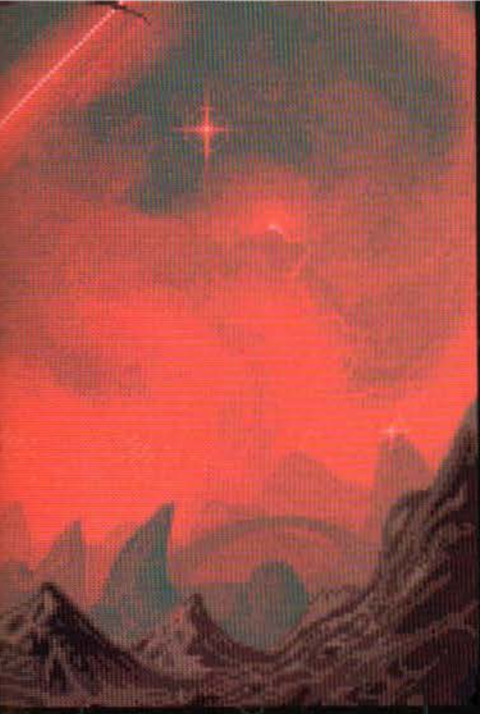
"WITH MULTIMILLION-POUND DEVELOPMENT DEALS, THE DAYS OF OFFERING DEALS ON A WHIM AND DEVELOPING ON TRUST ARE GONE"



Perhaps, we propose, there's a hint of the old ways, and of a tangible publisher brand, in Traveller's Tales? The logo's certainly whimsical enough, and the portfolio has its moments of cheery creative abandon. Burton agrees in part: "We've just changed our logo, actually. We can't pretend that we have an image as such, but I think that when Giant was talking to the press about *Lego Star Wars*, the way they approached it was very old-school. There was no agenda, it was just about showing people a genuinely fun game, just letting them know it existed. And I think the press reacted well to that, supporting the underdog and all.

"I would prefer to be in an identifiable collective such as Psygnosis, but we are a little fish in a big pond and partnering at the moment makes the most sense. Distribution is an expensive and complex business, and is not something we need to do as we can partner to cover it. Soon, everything will be digital and then we'll just move into that – much more our area of expertise. The best example is Disney and Pixar. Disney provided the exposure to the point where Pixar was as recognisable a brand as it was. As long as we are promoted along with our partners, we benefit."

But isn't there a trend nowadays of publishers actively playing down the identities of studios, especially among the big players? "There are commercial reasons why publishers would want to downplay their identities and importance," Edmonson believes, "but with the right developers it makes a lot of sense to *promote* them. With



As the MIDI pan pipes and sampled guitars howled, *Shadow Of The Beast II*'s fondness for prog-rock fantasy transcended its cover art

Infogrames, we never felt that wish to hide us, but then I had sold Reflections to them so it was a different situation."

Edmonson's influence over Reflections was ultimately a martyr to that sale (though as reported last month, it's hardly done him lasting financial harm). Yet it's hard to imagine him falling out of the loop, just as Chudley, Burcombe, Burton, Jones and indeed Creative Assembly founder Tim Ansell are unlikely to relinquish their lofty statures any time soon. But is such survival instinct really attributable to Psygnosis?

"The reason that they're successful," believes Hetherington, "is that they have great attention to detail. There are times in a developer's life when the publisher will say: 'Yeah, yeah, yeah, very interesting, now give me the product'. But a lot of those developers have a very independent streak. If you speak to their principals, they will talk attitudes which I hope they learned at Psygnosis: to be product-proud, product-sensitive, and go the extra mile. If you look at *PGR3*, Martin Chudley was obviously working to a deadline because it had to be a launch title. But I'm sure he pushed that to the wire. In fact I *know* he pushed it to the wire."

For his part, Chudley identifies a more interpersonal inheritance. "We've tried to keep the same philosophy and friendly attitude that we've had over the 12 years we've had staff, and I think that helps keep us strong," he says. "We always felt that when Ian's ideals for a close-knit, friendly and passionate environment became over-ridden by 'corporate', that was the end of the old Psygnosis. Obviously we'll try and not let that happen to us."

"The focus on visual quality stayed with me for sure," says Edmonson. "Everything else has changed so much over the years that little remains of the old practices."

Burcombe agrees that while spiritually the old torch burns, it isn't an easy one to carry: "In those days games were designed on-the-fly by anyone on or off the team. Development was a seat-of-the-pants, ad-hoc affair with little coordination or management. The risk of failure and delay was just about affordable as long as you nailed one big hit every couple of years – by 'big', I mean 50,000 units used to be cause for celebration before *Lemmings* showed up.

"But these days and going forward the investment and risk is so high that it needs to be carefully managed and controlled so we don't blow it all up the wall and find ourselves without a job next year. For this to have happened everything has had to mature and I'm glad it has. I wouldn't want to see my family at the mercy of the type of risk-taking we saw back then."

As for Hetherington himself, the continuation of his portfolio has so far revealed little of those fantastical creative roots, though clearly the accompanying attitude is undiminished. We proffer that having focused primarily on simulation titles, the Evolution studio he now oversees bears greater similarity to co-founder Martin Kenwright's former home, Digital Image Design. He's quick to assert that change wil be forthcoming: "What's happened with Evolution is that it's spent five years doing *WRC*. Under the rules of engagement with the licensing body and the publisher, that's what we had to do. So really it's a victim of circumstance rather than philosophy. We've not achieved our full potential over the last five years but, in part, it's been a conscious decision. We wanted to build a company and it's become very successful. *MotorStorm*, if you like, will be the Psygnosis product. We've lived under the rock for a long time but will break out of it with that – you'll see what the company's capable of."

Were a spiritual heir to Psygnosis emerge in one publishing form or other (could it even, as Chudley suggests, be Microsoft?) then it's unlikely that a consumer would immediately notice. The most exotic packaging you're likely to see on a shop shelf in coming generations is a stencilled tin, while small team projects mightn't appear on them at all in the near future (instead choosing the nascent online route) and Roger Dean's sojourn into the artistic realm of gurning mutated ultimate badasses is, at best, not happening. But let that be cause for optimism among nostalgic fans and critics of the way things have become, because it means that some form of spiritual succession (whether directly inspired or not) may already, subtly, be upon us. Philosophically, at least, there's life in the old bird yet.

PSY

Psygnosis' role in the origin of PlayStation was greater than that of most thirdparties, as Hetherington proudly relates: "When PlayStation was first conceived, it was not going to be released in the western world. The amount of memory it had meant that it was a load-and-go machine, neither streaming nor making real use of the CD. If you could have made a three-megabyte CD, that would have been fine for them in Japan. Their development systems were a mess – *everything* was a mess. When they bought Psygnosis, PlayStation was not viable, and if you'd relied on the Japanese for support as a platform developer, nothing would have happened. Psygnosis built the development systems for the European market."





Hetherington's slate at E3 '06 will include more than just PS3 launch title *MotorStorm* (left), in development at Evolution. Of the other studios he has helped father since Psygnosis, Real Time Worlds will be demoing *Crackdown* and *APB* (right), while BigBig will present *Pursuit Force II*

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

World Of WarCraft



There's no escape from Azeroth. Even those stuck in the level-40 doldrums eventually graduate to the treats awaiting those who persevere towards the endgame.
PC, VIVENDI

Burnout Revenge



The cars get battered while the engine gets better. A buffed return to the 'information superhighway' means Achievements for both the Live game and your gamer profile.
360, EA

Project Zero 3: The Tormented



The *Project Zero* team reapplies its grisly craft with assured ease. Even the most shock-resistant players will find their hearts jump-started by its obvious but effective scares.
PS2, TECMO

Awards unceremonious

When is an Achievement not an achievement?



Ridge Racer 6's Achievements encourage creative rather than persistent play, asking you to pull 360s, win races without using nitrous and rack up a hi-score in *Pac-Man*. Why don't more games share this imaginative approach?

Among the Achievements for *Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter* on 360 is an award for being 'Committed', given in return for playing its multiplayer mode for eight hours straight. While it may very well be the literal definition of its moniker (and an explicit contravention of the health advice in the manuals of most games), its use as a gauge of a player's dedication is useless.

A quick tour of *GR:AW* forums soon after the game's release reveals a number of threads containing similar advice: you can earn this accolade by leaving yourself in a locked, auto-starting online lobby, going to bed, and waking up with the award on your profile, with no real cost apart from a slight spike in your electricity bill. Similar workarounds are available for an equally arduous Achievement that requires the player to host 1,000 multiplayer matches. What's the point?

By J Allard's own admission, there were going to be teething problems as the Achievements system levelled itself out while developers crafted balanced selections of awards for their games. But the Achievement line-ups for most games are settling into an utterly drab rhythm: finish the offline game on all difficulties, mop up the sidequests and put in several hours online, with the occasional near-impossibility thrown in for good measure.

Its only true success so far, it seems, is to coerce a certain core of gamers – the dot within the dot within the dot – to snap up every piece of 360 software available, both full-price and via Live Arcade, in order to guzzle up the Gamerpoints stored within. So, while 360 sports games seem intent on offering fat portions of points for very little play, is it now perhaps in the interest of certain publishers to keep it this way, so that those serial Achievers provide a small, but guaranteed, turnover of purchases?

The potential breadth of appeal of the Achievements system isn't, at present, being exploited well, with few games – such as *Ridge Racer 6* and *Dead Or Alive 4* – stepping away from the tired templates in any significant fashion. The system needs more thought and coordination if it's going to appeal to more than just day-one obsessives and cockfighting completists. Or, maybe, was it never planned as being anything more?



84 **The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion**
360, PC



86 **Tomb Raider: Legend**
360, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX



88 **Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter**
360, PC, PS2, XBOX



89 **Metroid Prime: Hunters**
DS

90 **Odama**
GC

91 **Daxter**
PSP

92 **The Godfather**
360, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX

93 **Grandia III**
PS2

94 **Top Spin 2**
360

95 **Brain Training**
DS

96 **Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror**
PSP

97 **Baito Hell 2000**
PSP

97 **Tetris DS**
DS

Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three, 4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven, 8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC PRICE: £50 (360) £40 (PC)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES
DEVELOPER: BETHESDA PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E155, E160



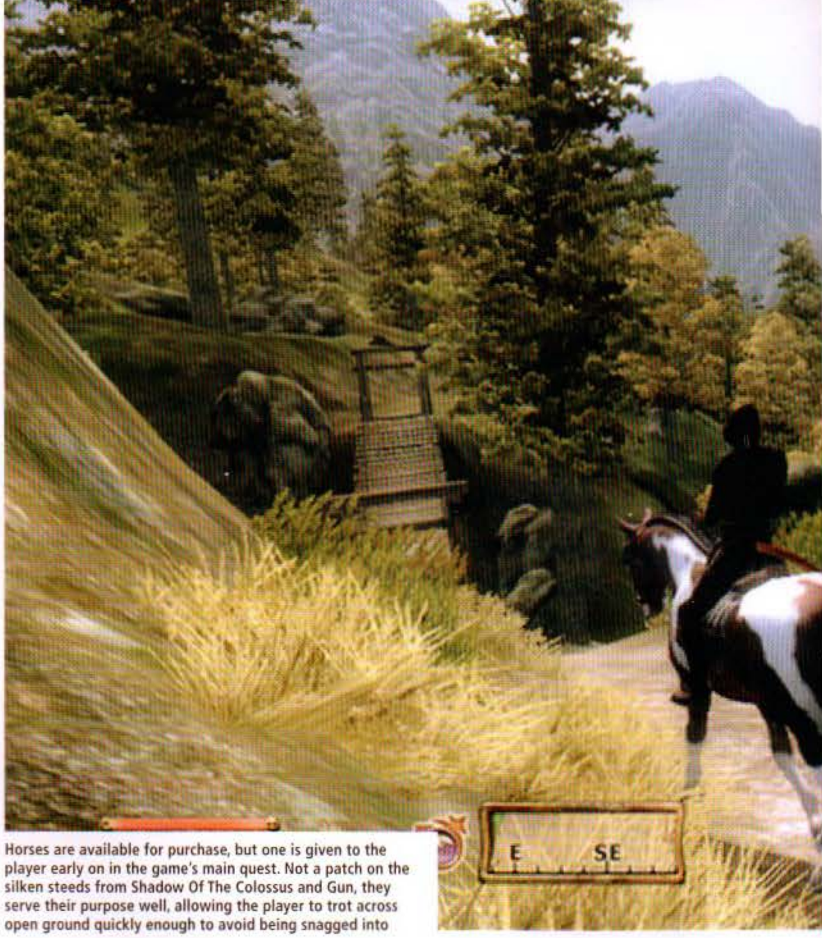




Oblivion's inhabitants follow a daily routine, an advance that succeeds in adding life beyond the typical carpet-pacing inhabits of a typical RPG. The routines in question are rarely of note but it's hard not to feel affected by a person's presence – especially while they sleep – as you burgle their home

Thinking very big and very small – that's *Oblivion*. A game world expansive enough to make San Andreas seem like a cul-de-sac, but furnished right down to the simplest household item. *Morrowind* was one of the few games to proffer open-ended ideas as more than just bullet-point hyperbole, and its skeleton is still clearly visible in *Oblivion*, but it's a frame that carries plenty more flesh. *Morrowind* thought very big and very small as well, but offered little in between – *Oblivion* goes some of the way to filling in that massive gulf between fine detail and vast size with some traditional video game frippery: solidity, variety and improved signposting. But it only goes so far.

Although it was *Oblivion*'s outdoor environments that flexed themselves so powerfully in pre-release screenshots, they've turned out to be the weakest visual aspect. The overworld is home to some grating framerates and muddily-textured landscapes that only blossom into full lushness as the player walks near. There's still plenty of snapshot beauty to be had, though, moments when even the barest of scenes conspire with a warm sunset or chilly night sky to produce some enchanting views. When taken in tandem with the plush variety of flora, it can often be achingly beautiful, but falls foul of visual stuttering that causes a whole other ache. It's not hard to see that Bethesda has chosen the lesser of two evils: having a finite draw distance for the landscape would've subtracted from the sense of place more than some chugging



Horses are available for purchase, but one is given to the player early on in the game's main quest. Not a patch on the silken steeds from Shadow Of The Colossus and Gun, they serve their purpose well, allowing the player to trot across open ground quickly enough to avoid being snagged into

and forestry pop-up ever could. Its stars, however, are indoors, in *Oblivion*'s townhouses and dungeons – shrines, tombs, caves, the Oblivion plane itself (see 'Hellhole') and even an abstract dreamworld or two – where its sharp lighting and rich textures nestle extremely well together. And it's all best absorbed in firstperson, as opposed to the alternative and slightly clumsy thirdperson perspective offered.

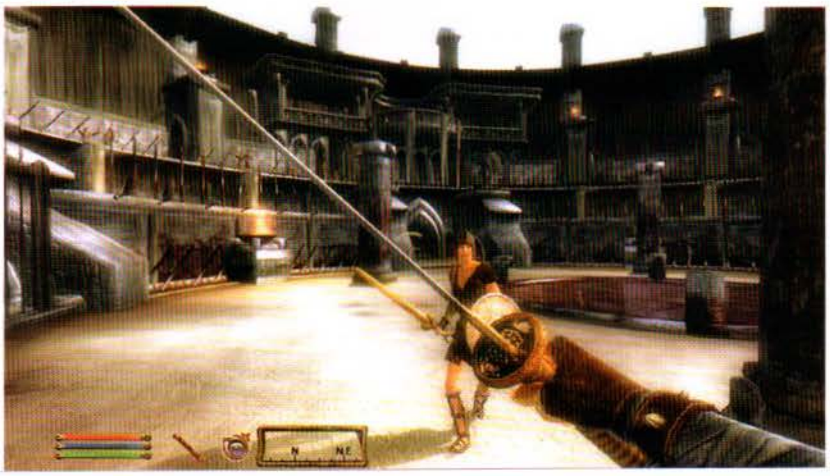
Bethesda has given its world a convincing and often hypnotic physicality, with effective enemy designs enriched by some great audio

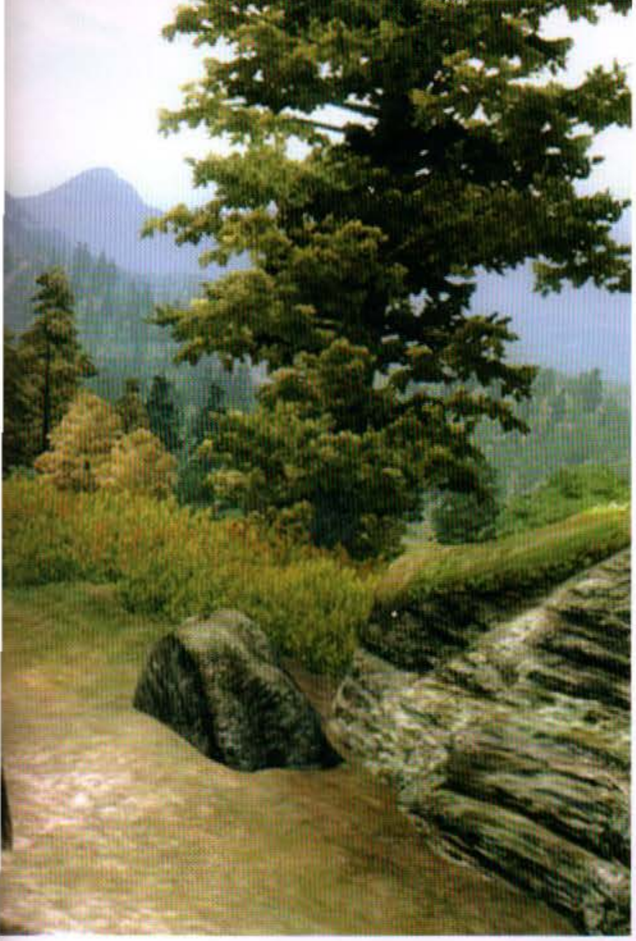
Bethesda has given its world a convincing and often hypnotic physicality, with effective enemy designs enriched by some great audio touches, and a physics engine that seems capable of far more than anything asked of the player. Still, it's a world that's not robust enough to prevent the occasional AI flip-out and ragdoll breakdance, the former of which can sometimes lead to a broken mission and a traipse back to the nearest quicksave. Loading times are generally acceptable considering the size and detail of some sections, but plenty of areas can lead to a foot-tapping wait. There's little pause for access when skipping through soundbites of *Oblivion*'s wholly spoken script, although the repetition in the voices used becomes apparent all too quickly.

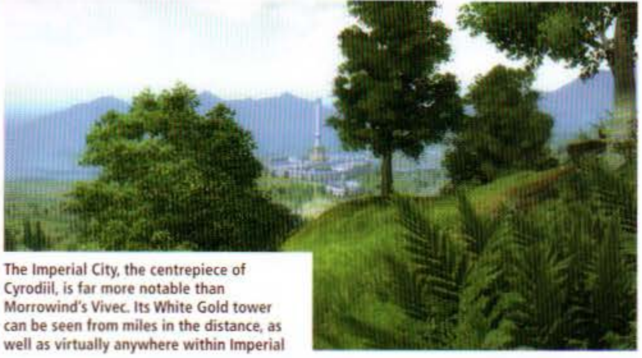
Mission design is a true improvement over that of *Morrowind*, offering diversity within the game's horrendous quantity of quests, leading to plenty of standout moments but this doesn't prevent a number of tasks from feeling like humdrum legwork for the sake of farming experience. But there's ample story here – indeed, some of *Oblivion*'s best and most affecting plotlines are the ones you're not spoonfed. Root around and pay attention, and there are often hidden strands to be exploited, to give the player room to wiggle their willpower, both in approach and execution. There's no karma here, just a clockwork universe driven completely by the player's input. You're rarely punished for inaction, too, which is why



The Imperial City's battle arena is, essentially, the game's fifth guild, a gladiatorial league where the player can participate in order to climb through the ranks, or bet on the outcome of other battles. If it's the latter, you'll get a ringside seat within the imposing amphitheatre







The Imperial City, the centrepiece of Cyrodiil, is far more notable than Morrowind's Vivec. Its White Gold tower can be seen from miles in the distance, as well as virtually anywhere within Imperial





If there was ever a game to test 360's robustness, it's Oblivion. During some 40 hours of play, we experienced just one crash; it's one too many, of course, but a regular and unobtrusive autosave helps limit the damage

Oblivion manages to offer such a magnitude of things to do at any given moment.

Still, this is very much a descendent of *Morrowind*, and so a love of character crafting, and amassing premium stats and equipment, is essential, but *Oblivion* takes pains to make it a smoother experience. The well-presented quest log replaces Morrowind's dire diary, and next-step locations for each mission are available at all times. The clean menu system and D-pad shortcuts help keep things neat, while the player's cursor offers plain and clear information about their stealth status or the illegality of any action. Lockpicking and speechcraft skills are applied through minigames that initially seem confusing, but prove worthwhile, except for the latter's tendency to make the player sit through some relentless, repeating dialogue. Incur the wrath of an ally with some accidental and poorly aimed attacks, and you can now yield in order to ask them to stop. Hand-to-hand combat is weighty and offensive, but can still feel graceless, and the invisible walls along some of the world's edges are disappointing.

With some of these details in mind, it's no surprise that playing a thief-class character proves more tangible and rewarding than most others, allowing the game world and its wind-up inhabitants to be fully exploited. Generally, though, while players can choose a set of skills to major in, the temptation to see and experience aspects that are outside your speciality never go away, and, crucially, are never taken away by the game itself. Once this hits home, it's hard to step away from – despite the glitches and the incoherent law system (stealing, trespassing and certain murders can be committed without a trace, while most other crimes are instantly registered).

It's debateable whether *Oblivion* is a great adventure, but it's certainly one of the broadest around and one that's a willing canvas for a variety of approaches from its players. It's best suited to those with an eye for the smallest of details, or else the dungeons, townhouses and fields seem identical to those just passing through. Played with care and tolerance – two major caveats – it's unbeatably absorbing, and once you enter into its mode of thought and grasp its logic, it's beautiful. If you don't, it seems bloated and silly. Ultimately, it's several confident steps closer to the self-contained RPG utopia that Bethesda outlined with *Morrowind*, but still hasn't reached it. **[8]**

Hellhole

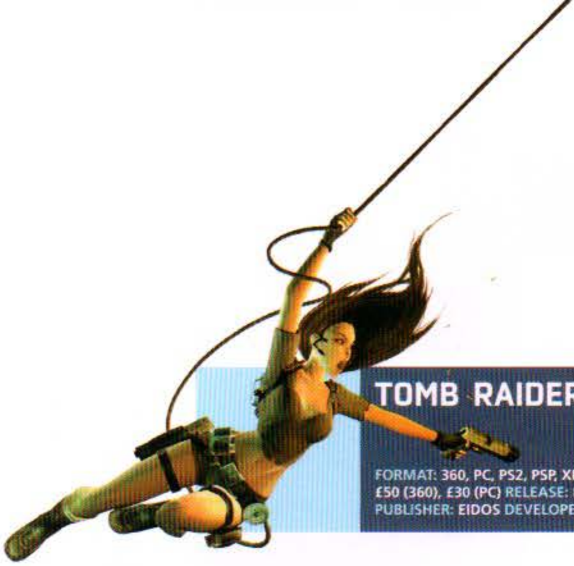


***Oblivion*'s most striking environment is the titular plane itself, a hellish swirl of bloody skies, crumpled masonry and aggressive plant life. It's a world that claws at the player with a handful of hazards and a scattering of enemies, as they march to the tower in the centre of each Oblivion plane. This contains the Fury Spike – a fiery pillar that shoots up through the centre of the structure. The journey to the top of the Spike in order to seal the plane, along a spiral of malevolent corridors that belong in *Silent Hill*'s underworld, is a memorable and atmospheric one during the virgin voyage. It's a shame, then, that these areas feel so similar, meaning that the accomplished atmosphere of horror feels so short-lived.**



Membership of four guilds are available to any player, none of whose quests interfere directly: Mages, Fighters, Thieves and the Dark Brotherhood. Joining the first two is a triviality, but the latter pair requires the player to commit certain crimes before being invited to join







TOMB RAIDER: LEGEND

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 (PS2, PSP, XBOX), £50 (360), £30 (PC) RELEASE: NOW (PS2, PSP, XBOX), TBC (360, PC)
PUBLISHER: EIDOS DEVELOPER: CRYSTAL DYNAMICS PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E156







***Legend* on Xbox is such a complete visual experience – pulling together the best of the hardware's technical tricks – that we're suddenly inclined to fear for its 360 port. Though it looked the part at our last encounter, you have to wonder if its hi-def sheen can consistently benefit the game's delicate textural treatment**

Tomb Raider became a suffix of Lara Croft long before its Hollywood debut cemented the change with a revised title, and that evolution of the brand has always outpaced the design of its games. But, in hindsight, perhaps we should be thankful that *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* crashed the series so entirely. Crystal Dynamics, a developer long versed in the art of juggling action, melodrama and spectacle in thirdperson form, has placed a bold tick beside Eidos' recently established primary objective: restore and modernise its fallen icon.

Whether or not you appreciate the makeover depends on what attracted you in the first place. Were it the sensation of true exploration – pushing deeper into the unknown without a thought of escape – then expect mild disappointment or at least a surprise. Rather than long, atmospheric trails, *Legend*'s levels are multifaceted by design, functioning as story snippets, time trials and treasure hunts – geared as much for your tenth visit as your first. The escapism they offer comes in bolts rather than slow burns, genuinely memorable setpieces occurring in quick succession within environments which, if attempted at speed, last minutes rather than hours. It's a small game – the main story easily conquerable in less than six hours once you've deciphered its puzzles – but it isn't measly.

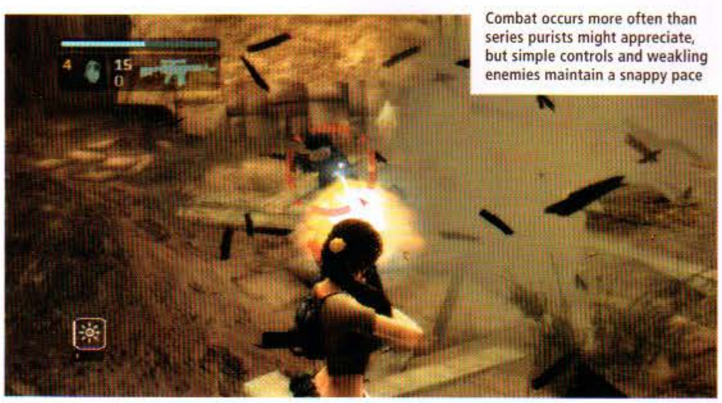
For one thing, the art direction is uniformly outstanding. Its environments aren't exclusively subterranean – that's no surprise – but they do convey a recurrent theme of dereliction that sets a strong tone. A cheap amusement funhouse beaten by rain and cloaked in rust, an X-Files-inspired facility filled with dilapidated yet functional Soviet experiments, and a forgotten crash site overlooking a frozen temple all reverberate with atmosphere, delivering more drama than can be found in many games twice *Legend*'s size. The leading narrative may be hokum, but its most interesting stories are those etched into broken walls, strewn in ruined form across floors and carried in the putrefied particles that clog the air. It's a fleeting but focused environment for what proves to be a highly entertaining comeback.



Before *Legend*'s arrival, there was a real question of why gamers should still care about Lara Croft. The answer, it becomes clear, is as it's always been: it isn't about what Lara is like to look at, but about what she's like to *be*. Appreciation of this character is conveyed through the controller, not the eyes, and felt in the hands rather than trousers. Yes, her physical form is still as skewed as ever, and only a staunch Anglophobe would cool to the sound of Keeley Hawes' voiceover, but the key appeal is one of interface and locomotion. It's tempting to say that the game mechanically owes its soul to *The Sands Of Time*, but its systems are more a product of both past example and considered innovation.

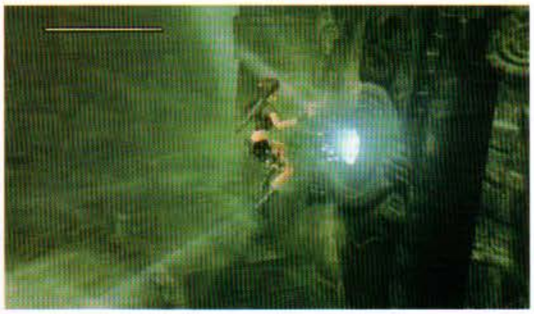
> Rather than long, atmospheric trails, Legend's levels are multifaceted by design, functioning as story snippets, time trials and treasure hunts

With sufficient practice you can leap, roll, shimmy and slide through its chambers with practically no fear of imposed error, and that's a defining achievement. If Lara oversteps an edge, she grabs; if your analogue direction is off – which, in games with dynamic cameras such as this, just happens from time to time – she dangles



Combat occurs more often than series purists might appreciate, but simple controls and weakling enemies maintain a snappy pace





Once you've recognised that many of them now employ real-world physics, the puzzles that Crystal has neatly placed throughout *Legend*'s chambers fall into a gently thought-provoking pattern. Inventive enough to satisfy yet built on convention, they seldom hamper progress





Metropolitan skyboxes: an easy way to win our hearts if implemented well, and pulled off with supreme confidence during Lara's Tokyo stop-off. It's a shame the mission is so brief



Motorbike chases serve as occasional introductions and codas to the more traditional explorations. Inoffensive enough and actually enjoyable for the most part, they nonetheless feel unwelcome during time trials that could have been abridged



With the grid system now buried in a tomb of its own (called *The Angel Of Darkness*), block shifting is a more natural, nimble process

while you quickly make a corrective move. Button tapping also speeds up the majority of actions, solving a catalogue of established issues related to the monotony of cautious movement. When tackling time trials (which incidentally are time-*limited*, counting down rather than up), this overall reliability of control pays dividends.

A scattering of puzzles seeks to complement the gymnastic challenge, but their underlying tech deserves greater recognition than their design. Much of what you see and everything you touch in *Legend* is managed by an expertly engineered physics engine. Like most of the game's components, the new rappel move is fully fledged rather than a novelty, and as a consequence can produce believable interactions with a variety of objects. Unfortunately, combat isn't so finely tuned, but it's certainly efficient. Lock, shoot, run and dodge are seldom combined as easily as they can be here, and button prompts over destructible objects integrate them into the scheme of battle with similar success. However, unwieldy bullet-time vaults are often more trouble than they're worth, as are grenade tosses. Boss battles lack spice, with underdeveloped attack patterns, and while QTE cinematics add variety, they would have benefited from using random rather than fixed button sequences.

To suggest that *Legend* was a jack of all trades and master of none would be unfair – much of Crystal's work here is masterful, not least the Lara model itself, which links artful animations with such elegance as to make it one of the best ever created, and whatever streaming technology has facilitated the near-exclusive use of high-resolution textures is similarly deserving of praise. But you can see why such a claim would be made: *Legend* covers many bases, and has knowingly sacrificed a considerable part of the purity which, for many, made *Tomb Raider* memorable to begin with.

One cinematic has Lara protesting that the 'bloody tourists' – the opposition forces – have arrived to spoil her view, but compared to her former self she's no less a sightseer. Nonetheless, she's privy to some wondrous sights, and in motion isn't far from being one herself. Some may argue over what the series should have become, but what's important is that it has made that tough decision for itself, and established a rock solid foundation for inevitable, now justified successors. **[8]**

Mansion: Impossible



It's tough to decide whether Croft Manor, available for exploration from the start of *Legend* and beautifully rendered, is describable as bonus content. It has no objective beyond acquiring hard-to-reach and otherwise hidden artefacts, and in no way sits within the game's story. But its purposes are threefold: to train you in the nuances of the game's movement system, re-establish the bedrock of Lara's character, and offer an enjoyable companion to a very brief game. The gymnasium is the undoubted highlight, decked with a bewildering setup of crossbars and climbing apparatus, and home to several derived puzzles. There's more than a passing air of *Resident Evil* grandeur about the place, and, like the other levels, it offers plenty of unlockable extras such as pistol upgrades and costumes.



For a time, the face of *GR:AW*'s multiplayer modes was a pale reflection of what Tiwak was painstakingly attempting to produce elsewhere. Things have changed, however, and despite a drop in HDR effects, much of Red Storm's game looks great



GHOST RECON: ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PC, PS2, XBOX PRICE: £50 (360), £40 (XBOX) RELEASE: NOW (360, XBOX), TBC (PC, PS2)
PUBLISHER: UBISOFT DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (TIWAK, RED STORM)

'Special' ops



For those who've ever wondered how Michael Keaton would fare leading The Dream Team into a military hotzone, *GR:AW* is a revelation. When Mexican insurgents charge from their transports with white heat, screaming blue murder and framed by unmistakable red diamonds, the Ghost soldiers become lost. Though they're keen to demonstrate that taking cover behind a corner is well within their wisdom, they'll often choose to perplex the enemy by doing so behind, say, a nice plant or, as you'll soon discover, a wall of thin air. But their concentration is undeniably intense. Focused on an enemy position, they'll let nothing stand in the way of an explosive kill, vehicles and commanding officer included.

Contrary to prior impressions, it's special ops stalwart Red Storm that plays general in *GR:AW*. Its multiplayer component is far better suited to the game's design potential than a singeplayer campaign that's more the frontline rookie, dazzled and dazed by blast upon blast upon blast. Ubisoft's Tiwak studio, apparently hoisted by its own premise, has assembled an unwitting reflection of modern televised war: overpowered like a videogame, fought by a starry-eyed infantry that videogames have reared. Though the 'Ghost' moniker presumably reflects some kind of ethereal stealth, here it suggests brain death.

But the loss of one expected dynamic has given rise to another, and what solo *GR:AW* achieves in the John Rambo stakes is *just* enough to stay our disappointment at its Tom Clancy snub. The strictly plotted action isn't something to be survived so much as pursued, guzzled before it's gone like water from a leaking canteen. Together with a mostly efficient take on inventory management, the standard loadout of grenades, pistol and rifle is an ideal gift to the reckless. The near-future weapons pack enthralling and genre-tweaking firepower, even if they've partially inspired the game's misadventure.



Its skylines are modelled to the distant horizon, but many of *GR:AW*'s singleplayer levels take place across disappointingly slender mission areas. Even when navigable real estate is available, the game often restricts access until a later stage

Thunderous presentation has consumed both its time and resources to the point of continuing instability. Our playthroughs suffered a wide spectrum of glitches from nuisance foreground pop-up to more conventional clipping and animation issues, all overshadowed by one extraordinary moment when almost every visible asset began fading in and out of existence. The capacity for intended spectacle does remain, but in pockets rather than consistent waves. Explosions jar the senses, thermal vision Apache strikes indulge them further, and the game's Mexico City, melting beneath the blazing sun and choking on debris, is a high-definition dream.



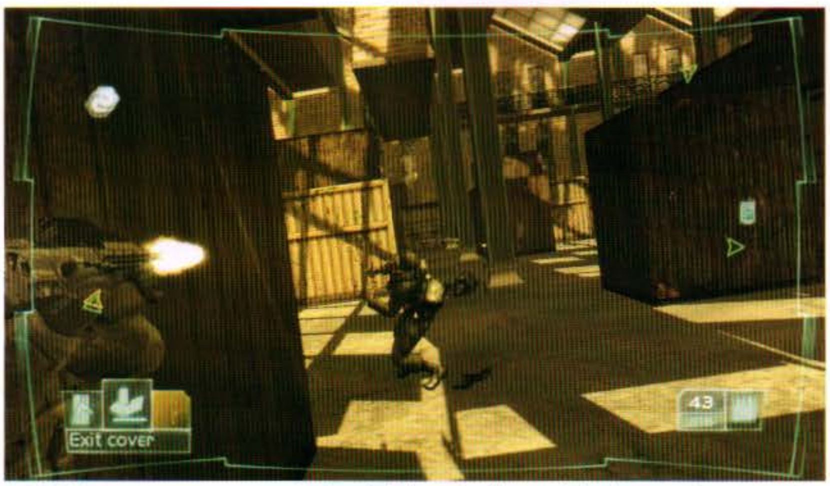
Thermal vision is well implemented, more as an aesthetic device than a military one. Occasionally unreliable, it can nonetheless make visual sense of a cluttered battlefield

But the attempt to blow people away has surrendered much of *GR:AW*'s ability to draw them in. Its AI (see "Special' ops') can be imbecilic, its stand-offs turning quickly into walkovers and its urban jungle more like a trail, walled into a minimal playing area by the sheer pressure of its looks. It's a rollercoaster but in every sense of the word, leaving the real game of soldiers for its better half.

Whether spent carnival shooting braindead bots or duelling with the wits of Live opponents, time with *Warfighter*'s multiplayer modes is seldom dull and often electrifying. That feared weakness of separate development is actually its strength, freeing its ambitions from the singleplayer design. As much home to exhaustingly strategic games of cat-and-mouse marksmanship as to thrilling siege scenarios and point-to-point run and gun, it's also a blessing to a console on which *PDZ* set a rotten visual bar. The wealth of gametypes and sheer acreage of diverse terrain quickly makes the initially outlandish 'eight hours straight' Achievement a legitimate hazard of play. The coming months may leave only embers of *GRAW*'s explosions, but its online glow will endure. **[8]**







The MRC-LW prototype weapon represents the pinnacle of the game's military modernism, its mounted camera removing the need to expose yourself when firing from cover. Like the singleplayer game overall, it's exciting but overpowered





Bucking the trend of inventive bosses which has become the series' signature are the Octolith guardians – stationary and predictable foes which protect the game's artefacts. It's disappointing to see the developer rely on recycling the same stand-off (the difficulty increasing in increments) time and time again





Perhaps the most common enemy in the game, these fast-moving guardians are employed to slow your progress during *Hunters*' most nerve-wracking sequences – timed escapes back to Samus' ship after your retrieval of an Octolith artefact



Morphball puzzles, while never incredibly intricate or especially testing of your spatial awareness, still demand a steady hand, and can often create irritating pockets of frustration unless concentration is high. Use of both D-Pad for sudden movements and touchscreen for fine tuning is essential here



METROID PRIME: HUNTERS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOW (US), MAY (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (NST)
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E157

For a system that prides itself on its intuitive controls and simple, tactile innovation, it's strangely unsettling that the opposite is true of *Hunters*. Circle-strafing may be second nature with mouse and keyboard or dual-analogue control – but with a D-Pad and plastic pen? This is going to take some getting used to.

It's a case of practice makes perfect, then. Experimenting with the generous control options, and fidgeting between a variety of knee/desk/armchair configurations to strike the necessary balance between comfort and support, undoubtedly takes time, but perseverance reaps rewards. Namely in your enjoyment of a well-rounded, though limited, familiar *Metroid* experience.

You mightn't be stripped of your original move-set, as is customary for the series, but the process of exploring ever-expanding environments through judicious use of newly acquired weaponry remains intact. Fragmented differently than in previous instalments, the gameworld takes the form of diverse, self-contained planets and space stations accessed from a menu on Samus' ship – an interface which acts as the game's deep-space hub.

Though initially a little unwieldy, *Hunters* soon makes its mark. Environments, while often claustrophobic, boast excellent levels of detail and – given the obvious hardware constraints – are surprisingly adept in delivering contrasting atmospheres. Predictably, lava-drenched ruins, icy backwaters and industrial, metallic outposts are the order of the day – but they never look less than authentic and, with the help of some truly exemplary audio work, are perfectly capable of evoking the inimitable brooding solitude so essential to the series. Moreover, the singleplayer adventure is yet another sprawling, puzzle-heavy artefact hunt which, truth be told, is far bigger than we had any right to expect.

Naturally, there have had to be some concessions and compromises. There isn't an abundance of flora, for example – and the foes are restricted to a handful of fist-sized drones and skittish pests. Level design is nowhere near as ambitious, either, focusing on corridors, modest caverns and halls rather than breathtaking vistas. It's easy to see why: when *Hunters* gets too big for its boots (a firefight atop a gigantic, skyboxed pyramid structure, for example) the action inevitably slows to a crawl. It remains playable even at this speed, but it's hard not to grit your teeth. Such examples are isolated and, thankfully, rare – and the breadth of this generous package goes some way towards offering recompense.

Like *Mario Kart* before it, the singleplayer proves to be a competent companion to a solid multiplayer mode. Other than the inclusion of Samus in the seven-character roster, wifi or local wireless matches are as far removed from classic *Metroid* as you could imagine, providing fluid and often *Quake*-like skirmishes. Spanning seven match types, with deathmatch, territorial, defensive and capture modes across 24 arenas, there's a definite sense of craftsmanship here. Weapons are well balanced, while the sheer range of arena sizes available ensures that online play is more than just a token afterthought, making this one of the most rewarding action games available on DS. **[8]**



It's in multiplayer that stylus control really comes into its own. While aim-assist does play its part, the touchscreen affords enough accuracy and freedom to confidently score headshots with enough practice. Whether or not your index finger will be able to maintain a rapid rate of fire over successive bouts is another matter, though

Small but deadly



The seven Hunters all have access to a unique morphball derivative – a feature that opens up more strategic options than you may think. Samus' bomb-laying morphball is perhaps the weakest, with her rivals offering more interesting techniques. Weavel, for example, can lay a stationary turret while keeping a weak melee attack; Spire's melee attack is complemented by the ability to scale walls, while Vhoscythe's blades prove to be a most irritating hazard. However, these pale in comparison to Trace's Triskelion, an insect-like form that has the ability to launch itself at enemies at speed – expect Trace players to bare the brunt of vocal online hatred in the months to come.



ODAMA

FORMAT: GC PRICE: £40 RELEASE: NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: VIVARIUM
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E151, E161

Shigeru Miyamoto preaches clarity of design and simplicity of control. His old friend Yoot '*Seaman*' Saito evidently has very different ideas nowadays. *Odama* demands you use your hands and a range of 12 voice commands to simultaneously play pinball and realtime strategy. Unless you're capable of ambidextrously controlling twoplayer *Ikaruga* on your own, it's asking too much.

Like any pinball game, *Odama*'s 11 boards require both skill and luck as you rumble the eponymous ball through obstacles and enemies and (hopefully) avoid steamrolling your advancing army. It's alluringly busy, with *Pikmin*-esque swarms of troops and a cacophony of thumping drums, crashing scenery and whining rice bombs. The first boss stage, where your men commandeer a second pair of flippers while the Odama crashes satisfyingly through wooden watchtowers up top, shows there's potential in the idea – a mad, souped-up *Devil Crash* for the 21st century.

The need for the microphone, however, mutes *Odama*'s appeal. Admittedly, the need to bark orders keeps the tactics from overwhelming already overworked fingers. But it's also a pain. Hit-and-miss voice recognition, unnatural commands (not 'Close the gate', but 'Flood the river'), an army that requires constant encouragement to keep pushing forward – all this conspires to make failure (and a sore throat) depressingly routine. Combined with a harsh time limit, and low morale sinking your men into a stubborn sulk, it becomes simply too much.

By the sixth table, where the frustration is compounded by a central trench which happily sends the ball careering straight through the flippers for instant game over, you begin to suspect *Odama*'s creators understand neither the art of pinball nor the art of videogames. Success demands a near-impossible combination of instant reactions, unwavering routine, quick fingers and a keen eye (or, ideally, three eyes) – fail for even a couple of seconds and the few steps forward your troops have taken so far will be lost as they trudge a dispiriting path back against massed enemy forces. Against this viciously unforgiving design, winning becomes a vendetta rather than a pleasure.

There are no alternate button presses available as substitutes for the spoken commands – how could there be, when the joypad is already full with controls for either pinball or war strategy? Neither is there an option to remove the speech bubbles that clutter the display. It's admirable that Saito wants the player to imagine how 'soldiers think and feel' – as he explains solemnly in *Odama*'s manual – but perhaps there are better places to do it than in a pinball game.

It's telling that the more dejected and hoarse your voice becomes, the easier it seems for the forces to understand their orders. Whoever programmed *Odama*'s English speech recognition clearly wasn't having much fun either. **[4]**



Many of the soldiers' asides are genuinely amusing – the first time. Otherwise, the swarms of speech bubbles serve no informational purpose, and tend to interfere with the display at the worst possible moments



If your troops are overwhelmed, the Ninten Bell is pushed back – the game ends when it's forced back where it began, behind the flippers. This is rare on later tables, where scooping up new recruits for deployment is more common





Odama's strongest board. When the giant-sized warrior at the back is let loose from his cage and sent tumbling with the Odama, your troops will charge. Exhausting his energy bar in the time given is far from easy, though

Green giant



The key to victory is the Heavenly Odama, activated by a power-up released from demolished huts – or, occasionally, by striking the Ninten Bell the army is tasked with protecting. The glowing green ball rolls harmlessly through allies, while recruiting flattened enemies as reserve soldiers. This helps replace lost men as the battle rages, and restores morale among your men – crucial, as with low spirits the soldiers refuse to do your bidding. The game's at its most satisfying as the Heavenly Odama lays waste to the enemy, but with power-ups handed out randomly – and the appearance of new items relying on you activating the Mario-style '!' blocks scattered around the board – there's no guarantee you'll see enough of this Odama to turn the tide of battle your way.

Picking up items (with the cry of "Rally!") is integral to a successful *Odama* campaign. This pulley belongs to a gate at the end of the river: hook it up, and the army can then march across the drained riverbed





Each area can later be revisited, so that you can do more of the exploration that may have been hastily overlooked the first time around. Among other things, this is necessary in order for you to collect the remaining items needed to unlock all of the game's bonus content



DAXTER

FORMAT: PSP **PRICE:** $40 (£35) **RELEASE:** NOW (US), APRIL 14 (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEA **DEVELOPER:** READY AT DAWN
PREVIOUSLY IN: E151, E161

To stem needless backtracking, certain sections feature action-sequence escape hatches, either by way of sewage system chutes or zig-zagged zip-lines that quickly carry Daxter back to where he started



Daxter's seamlessly constructed world may initially feel at odds with traditional point-A-to-point-B level-based play, but in practice this lends it an appreciable coherence and fluidity. Ready At Dawn has certainly done a good job in disguising the game's linearity

That *Daxter* takes place in the immediate aftermath of the original *Jak & Daxter* is more than convenient storyline continuity. When Jak turned dark and armed himself to the teeth with vulcan fury and a furrowed brow, he gave up a legacy of a different kind, one of platforming purity and the innate joy of a romp through a world of bright light and colour. It is this legacy that his sidekick is left to take up on his own and it doesn't take long for that renewed visual and design philosophy to make itself apparent.

For his first mission as an exterminator-for-hire, Daxter finds himself carrying out pest control in a hotel flower garden, and the view upon entrance is striking on more than one level: first, with its purple and red and yellow blossoms bursting from the scenery, as a refreshing contrast to the gritty dystopian Haven City, but also as a testament to the astonishing level of aesthetic quality some may have forgotten Sony's PSP is capable of.

Daxter's environments are comfortably the most organic and lush the handheld has yet delivered, and are a credit to both the technical and artistic skills of California-based developer Ready At Dawn. The team's stated goal with *Daxter* – to strip away all the hybrid genre pretensions and deliver the same pure platforming that made up the original – is a welcome one, and it's clearly made good on its word. To cut what might have added up to run-and-jump monotony, *Daxter's* goals are smartly varied throughout the course of the adventure, with brief and intermittent vehicle-based diversions, occasional but not over-used classic pattern-based boss fights, and the odd environmental puzzle. But what the game lacks in mechanical experimentation and ingenuity it makes up for with solid implementation, with expansive levels that are deceptively linear, allowing the player to feel as if they're charting their own course while following the developer's every intended lead, without ever feeling lost.

Though surely a reaction to the constraints of short-burst portable play, Ready At Dawn's decision to populate the world with numerous closely clustered checkpoints means that death is usually little more than a quick inconvenience. While this cuts the frustration of repeatedly reaching challenging chokepoints, it also forces players a little too briskly through each of its levels, especially given the already relative ease with which the first half of the game can be negotiated.

Daxter's environments are all sparkle and verve, simplicity and economy. Creating an engaging latter-day world without over-relying on emergent play and therefore diluting its premise is no simple task, but Ready At Dawn has successfully maintained its focus, making its debut game a standout title on a platform lacking in must-haves. **[7]**

Sweet dreams



Though *Daxter* receives spray upgrades throughout the course of the main adventure, new combo moves and extended health can be earned back at exterminator HQ, where a quick round of shuteye transports the player into *Daxter's* megalomaniacal and Hollywood-obsessed dreamworld. Envisioning himself as the hero of Lord Of The Rings, Indiana Jones (pictured), and the ubiquitous Matrix, the referential and reaction-based minigames are the game's toughest and occasionally maddening, challenges – as well as the most satisfying to overcome.



Haven City is recognisable but understandably less densely populated than you might remember. Primarily it serves simply as a route between one infected location and the next, but rewards for exploration are peppered throughout its avenues making it a location well worth getting to know in as much intimate detail as you can. Besides, the view is worth it





Patronising button prompts, wearisome car chases and incapable gunplay are three of the many dubious traits *The Godfather* exhibits. Like a patchwork of recycled code degrading with age, its engine is disrespectfully lazy





The odd surprise is assured in a game so technically volatile. This baker was commendably hard-nosed despite being kneecapped and beaten with the plumbing of her shop. Even after her death she later returned to work

Lambasting EA for bringing videogame cliché to the treasured Godfather world is up there with querying what it would be like if Monopoly money were real. There's plenty in the game to suggest that it once had the bright ideas to pull off at least an enjoyable heist, but somewhere down the line the best intentions have gone to waste. When your standout moments are carbon-copied cinematics, you know you're in trouble







Having gathered together all of the entities and systems a Godfather adaptation would require, EA has completely failed to get them talking to each other meaningfully. Vendettas and rackets are particularly hollow examples

A likely story



Key to EA's injection of a new, largely peripheral character into The Godfather is the unseen chain of events that its original story suggests rather than shows. Taking it upon itself to bind those fringe objectives to a single agent – you – it's largely achieved a difficult justification, from a narrative point of view at least. Were its systems of bribing and intimidating NPCs based on more than the frenzied bashing and throwing of them into objects (your fists and head mostly, but also ovens and furniture), then perhaps its depiction of a city rife with illicit opportunity would hold credence. But from the first comedic confrontation onwards it never does, and by extension fails to substantiate your Corleone ties in anything more than cutscenes.



THE GODFATHER: THE GAME

FORMAT: 360, PC, PS2, PSP, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40 (PS2, XBOX), £30 (PC) RELEASE: NOW (PC, PS2, XBOX), SEPTEMBER (360, PSP) PUBLISHER: EA DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE PREVIOUSLY IN: E148, E151, E159

An open-world crime debut for its publisher, *The Godfather* has eyed the success of *GTA* but not the secrets. Its self-aggrandising use of a heavyweight licence has achieved little beyond raising one humiliating question: how do you justify treating players like children in a game that children were never meant to play? The answer, of course, is that the project itself is wrong-headed. Having sprayed a torrent of EA's resources up the wall it can hardly suggest itself ill-equipped, but rather uninformed and mismanaged. Given the source material and the available technology, the imbalance of visual quality between faces and furniture is at least justifiable, but the gulf between that of presentation and play is inexcusable.

An early concern, born over a year ago when all we had to judge was a synopsis and the enthusiasms of its authors, was the potential abandon with which *The Godfather* would drop its players into the pre-existing network of events and relationships. In this respect, it's a stark victory of videogame delinquency over cinematic poise. The Sicilian alter ego it has you create (who, amusingly enough, stands a very real chance of resembling Frankie Muniz) pops his face into otherwise shot-for-shot retellings of the movie's pivotal scenes. He makes a vaguely incongruous yet credible impostor when locked into a cutscene, but unleashed on to the game's pasta bowl of streets he's closer to Frank Drebin than Forrest Gump.

The opportunity to jettison expectations of authenticity and blast away regardless could have earned the game modest salvation, but neither the energy nor insight to craft such a parachute has been employed. Should you go searching for comedy value in the inane beatings that comprise its 'negotiations' or by bug-hunting through its missions you might yet salvage a smile, but the obstacles you'll face are legion. The HUD map, which by some foul witchcraft features pop-up despite being in 2D, is undermined by the gameworld's surprisingly palled facade and last-minute attempts at signposting. Long journeys, which pad its mission lengths to hugely disagreeable effect, require repeat visits to a fullscreen map that moves with nauseating judders rather than slick pans. The miserable vehicle handling doesn't help, and what seems like an attempt to compensate has turned every car chase into a lumbering cakewalk.

Part of you, while marvelling at their misdirection, will appreciate that efforts have at least been made. Your progression from upstart to Don requires both compulsory and optional achievements, and in the game's bid to suggest that a turf war bordering on *civil* war could somehow underpin the taut politics of book and film, a decent career structure has been assembled. And, yes, the game's visuals can also shine between glitches, while its gunplay, though comically unwieldy, still packs a punch. But the clash between noble intent and near-disastrous implementation remains remarkable. For such a costly flagship title to provide neither the promised statement of mainstream grown-up appeal nor even polished, lesser disposable thrills is a landmark failure. **[4]**



With skilled timing you can catch an enemy tossed into mid-air by one character with a second character's attack, thus granting you bonus damage and kudos



GRANDIA III

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: $50 (£28) RELEASE: NOW (US), TBC (UK), PUBLISHER: SQUARE-ENIX DEVELOPER: GAMEARTS

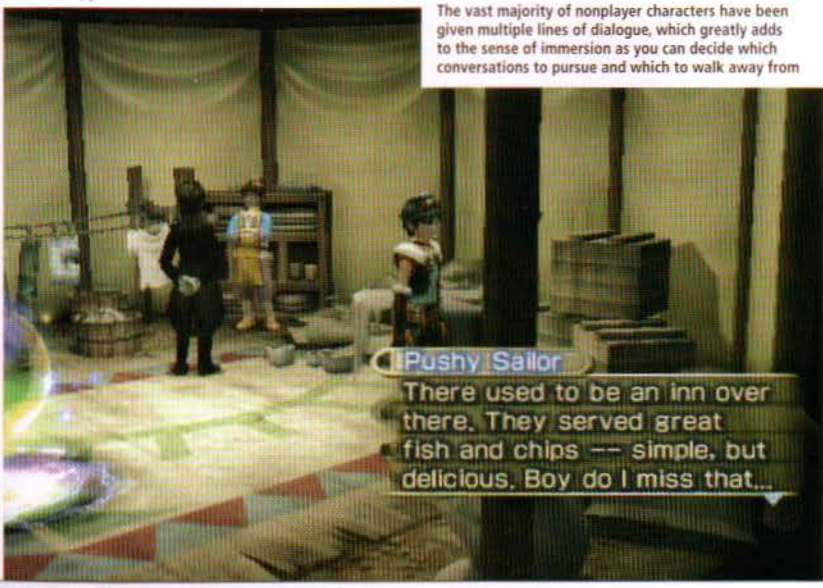
Judged purely on its battle system, *Grandia III* is the best RPG on PS2. The series has always prided itself on true evolution of the turn-based attacks that have increasingly tested gamers' patience as the years have rolled on, and here, that pioneering progression settles elegantly. Every encounter is fraught and exciting, forcing timed precision and genuine strategic planning to successfully counter, defend against and overcome enemy attacks. Almost uniquely in the genre, by forcing consideration of characters' positioning and enemy proximities, 3D space becomes more than just a fancy way of visually cloaking 2D mechanics.

The arcade-style statistics, congratulatory text and unveiling of secret techniques that punch the screen in visual accompaniment to the graceful action all conspire to ensure the current tussle is no sooner decided before you're looking forward to the next. It's easily the strongest element of the game, and clearly shows that there is still massive scope for invention and creativity in the face of its rivals' conservative and stagnated execution in this area.

But battles are only part of the RPG experience, and elsewhere the game struggles. A technically ambitious gameworld ensures, through careful forced camera angles, that the locations that frame the drama are always worth looking at. However, by opting for a more clichéd waxy and blemish-free anime visual vocabulary – compared to, say, *Dragon Quest VIII*'s felt-tip stylings – there's little ongoing character. This issue, trifling on the face of it, is hauled into significance by the decision to make this a world severed and scored by interminable invisible walls. There's no running freely through tall-grassed fields or dipping toes in the welcoming wash lapping at that bronze shoreline – rather everything outside of the path the developer sets you upon must be appreciated from a distance. This serves to undermine any sense of true immersion: each straightforward pathway is never more than a corridor to link the game's narrative rooms.

And the narrative does little to spur you on. Cutscenes are overlong (this is a relatively short game for one that comes on two discs) and their frequency slices and dices the gameplay without dramatic subtlety. Areas are small and limited, adding to the sense that the developer is quickly shepherding you through the plot, disapproving of the slightest diversion. While there is gentle rapport between party characters, evidenced by mostly natural and lifelike dialogue, it's all so inoffensive and characterless that it quickly becomes dull.

All of which leaves just the deep customisation options and complex combat to pull you through. It seems as if each franchise Square-Enix owns excels at one distinct area of RPG craft. Perhaps pooling the talents behind these spikes of greatness would create something genuinely definitive and memorable. **[6]**



The vast majority of nonplayer characters have been given multiple lines of dialogue, which greatly adds to the sense of immersion as you can decide which conversations to pursue and which to walk away from

Rather than requiring blind tapping of X on everything to discover interactive bits of scenery, the game prompts you whenever your character passes something of interest





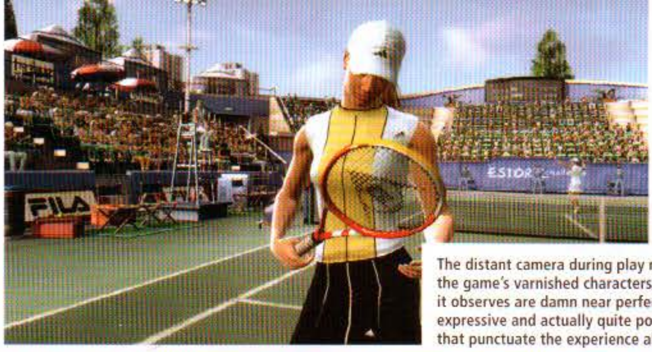


Your character's special moves continue to be improved and refined, even once newer ones have become available, and every attack's usefulness is cleverly balanced out as the game progresses

Time to kill



The 'initiative' clockwork gauge that has made the series so popular choreographs fights. Icons representing each character and enemy rotate around a circular gauge passing, as they do, through three phases: the command-entry area, command-execution area and a waiting zone. Attacking enemies delays their motion on the gauge, while being hit during the execution phase will cancel the attack outright. Different moves take different amounts of time to execute, and so trying to engineer your timings to launch combos becomes a compulsive pursuit, complicated by the fact that the same tactics can be used by the AI against you.



The distant camera during play mercifully overlooks the game's varnished characters, while the animations it observes are damn near perfect. But the overly expressive and actually quite poorly animated cutaways that punctuate the experience also cramp its style



TOP SPIN 2

FORMAT: 360 PRICE: £50 RELEASE: NOW
PUBLISHER: 2K GAMES DEVELOPER: PAM PREVIOUSLY IN: E161

Net income



A *Top Spin 2* career isn't for the idle, or indeed the casual. Its calendar offers (on most occasions) a choice of three activities for each week of the year: a practice session, a tournament or a special event. The latter two serve up plenty of unique examples, from the customary majors and minors to sponsor-specific in-house playoffs and national team events incorporating both singles and doubles matches. Each sponsor provides its own litany of objectives and cash rewards, while the shop is crammed with sensibly chosen goods. Had the rankings been trickier to scale and the difficulty curve more graceful from rookie to pro, this would have been a dream occupation.

Momentum in videogame sports can be both a punishment and reward for success, often confining games to the update schedules of publishers averse to the risks of change. Yet for *Top Spin*, the game that climbed the coat-tails of *Virtua Tennis* to a point higher on the genre's evolutionary ladder, that may have seemed the dream scenario. Robbed of its stride by the demise of Microsoft's XSN network and left to dwell on contributory lacklustre sales, it spent two years back in training, no doubt searching for answers. *Top Spin 2* steps on to court replete with them.

Developer PAM has reinvented a game that no longer strives to be a thinking man's alternative to *Virtua*, but something altogether superior. Coin-op spirit still exists in its heart, providing a vital yet still imposing gateway for the entry-level player, but so much has been astutely arranged around that core that to call it arcadey would be insulting. Ball physics, analogue sensitivity, base geometry and feature-set have all evolved together in one great upheaval.

In this sense, it's more a thinking developer's *Top Spin*, every change yielding a calculated benefit. The relationships between spin selection, character attributes, shot placement and power have been recalibrated so as to heighten control and maximise your capacity for error and excellence. An ingenious new feature is AI simulation, available at the outset of any game, set or match and essentially a cleverly calculated gamble of your form against your opponent's. By offering you a conscionable shortcut through one-sided matches, it's ripped out the entrenched pedestrianism of longterm play. *Top Spin 2* offers a generally excellent game of tennis, in fact, and plenty more besides.

Despite issues (see 'Net income'), its career mode's competence makes it a rarity among its peers, even if the loading screens that surface between matches, exercises and menus lend it a shambling flow. To say that it spares a thought for how it conveys the routine of a professional player is to do it a disservice, since a lot of thought has been purposefully *assigned* to that task. Yet the sights of match play itself are no less surprising, and a lesson in how to target and realise a sport's characteristic minutiae. Perhaps this is the game's most surprising overall trait, that it needs a high-definition display and Xbox 360 horsepower to really do it justice, even if they do in turn provide a headache of their own.

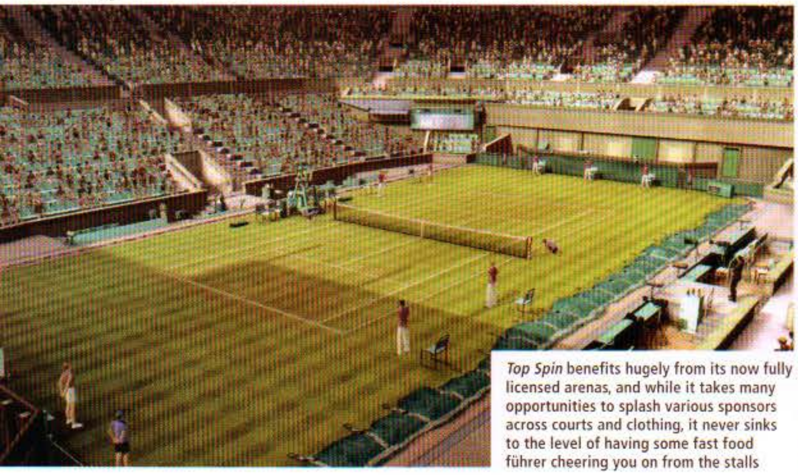
Tennis might be a sport made by characters, but between points the participants of this game make it look daft. There's an unwelcome *Amped* vibe to the goofy struts, grins and gestures, and while the anatomies of its models are accurate, its shaders and lighting effects are overcooked. *Top Spin* has put so much effort into achieving match fitness that it has, in this notoriously troubling department, been overwhelmed by the demands of the new generation. But it needn't look far for solace – it is, after all, hard to look truly stupid when you're the champion. **[8]**







Prepare for character-creation hell in a mode that, were it to follow a certain other publisher's naming system, would be called FaceAche. It's simply impossible to achieve an intended facial structure without locking yourself into an unending cycle of corrective adjustments

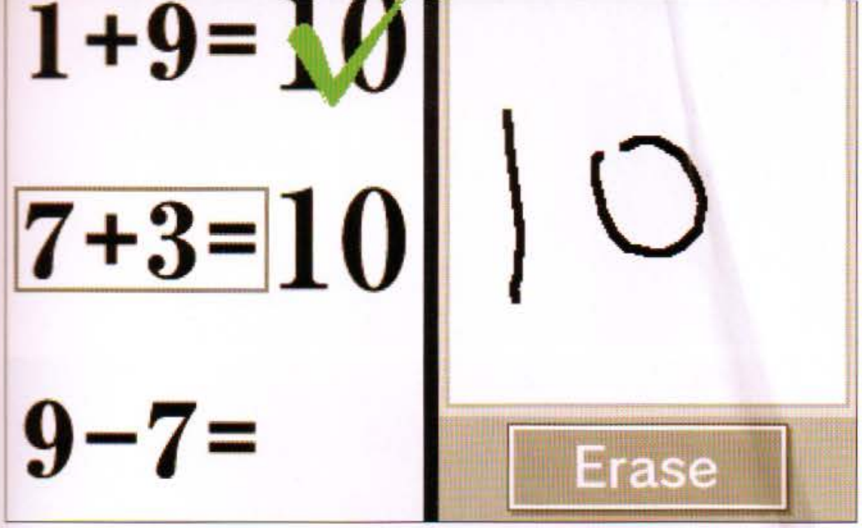


Top Spin benefits hugely from its now fully licensed arenas, and while it takes many opportunities to splash various sponsors across courts and clothing, it never sinks to the level of having some fast food führer cheering you on from the stalls

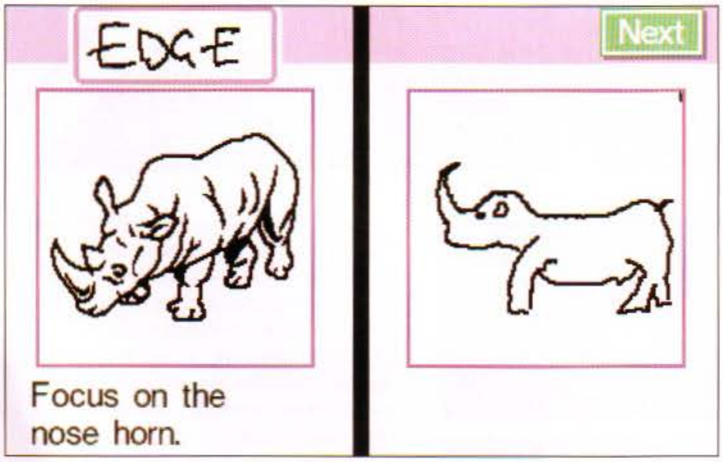
The division of the old unified risk shot into four distinct varieties, each a more audacious version of a standard button press (so backspin becomes drop shot and topspin a cross-court passing shot, for example), means greater strategic breadth and, surprisingly, more intuitive control

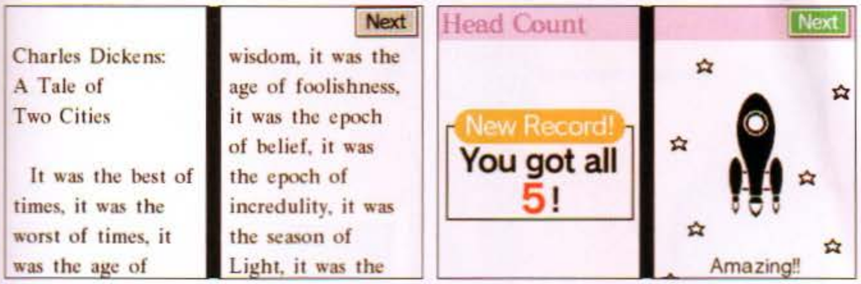




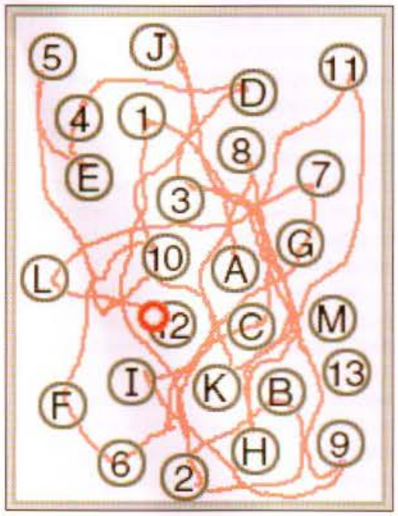


Handwriting recognition is crucial for *Brain Training* – both for letters and numbers – and in the main it's excellent, recognising correct, clear answers instantly and leaving a tiny pause to adjust poorly drawn characters





Some tasks are based on trust, such as the reading aloud as fast as you can test. Others can be scored, and rewarded with rankings (which run, a little oddly, from walking speed to rocket speed) and high scores, more like traditional videogames



Not all challenges can be won or lost. Professor Kawashima regularly challenges you to draw things from memory, or recall trivial facts from the last few days. These will then be cross-referenced, often amusingly, with data from any other profiles on the cart



BRAIN TRAINING

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥2,800 (£14)
RELEASE: NOW (JAPAN), MAY 19 (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

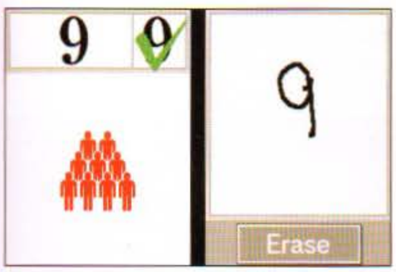
What was it for you? Eight sixes? Seven nines? It's long been argued that Nintendo's magic is its ability to make you feel like a child again, but *Brain Training* takes that child, plonks it back down in double maths and reawakens your inner eight-year-old's paranoia about that one sum you could never get right. How can this be the piece of software that's going to convert the world to gaming?

The same could be said of having to read aloud extracts from Edgar Allen Poe, or laboriously tracing lines between A,B,Cs and 1,2,3s. *Brain Training* may require only ten minutes of your day, but it's probably ten minutes more than you've spent on these kinds of tasks for a long, long time. The premise of the package is simple: each day – or less often, if you prefer – you can tackle one or all of a handful of mental agility tasks. Professor Kawashima, whose book the game is based on, is on hand to offer encouragement and advice and at the end of each session you can test your 'brain age' against the results you would expect from a bright 20-year-old.

It sounds like a total departure for Nintendo, but there's something amazingly familiar about it all. Kawashima's disembodied head is as charismatic – and occasionally as infuriating – as Tom Nook, and the game clearly draws on the skills learned in making *Animal Crossing* a place you could gladly visit every day even though nothing much ever changes. And there are clear traces of *Wario Ware* in the responsiveness and satisfaction of the puzzle games. Every single interaction in the game is fun – every menu makes a pleasing noise, every day is completed with a stamp on your calendar, every correct answer rewarded with a huge, fat tick. Suddenly, *Brain Training* doesn't seem like a brave new age for the company but the full expression of a philosophy that started out five years ago.

As a consequence, those tiresome times-tables and chunks of Dickens take on new life. Duelling multiplayer (up to 15 people on one cart) feels exactly the same as a round of *Mario Kart* – the elation of an early lead, the agony of throwing it away, the rivalries that edge into vendettas, and the triumph of a hard-won victory. The fact that it's just mental arithmetic simply doesn't matter: all it makes you realise is that most games are mental arithmetic one way or another.

Indeed, for a defining piece of non-game software, *Brain Training* is steeped in game dynamics. Each stamp you earn on your calendar contributes towards unlockables – new games, hard modes and the like – and every now and again Professor Kawashima will let slip word of a hidden Easter egg. Accomplished, well-presented and irresistibly engaging, *Brain Training* doesn't show why we need to reach beyond games, but how successfully games can reach beyond where they normally aim. **[8]**

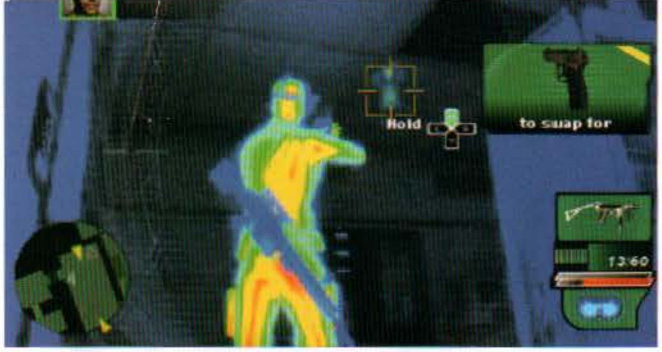


While some of the word games require deliberate thought, others make your unconscious take the strain. Counting people in and out of a house is one such task, and the savant-style number sorting of 'Low to High' makes you feel more like a magician than a maths expert

Su-do-ken!



For the western release of *Brain Training*, Nintendo has included a sudoku game which makes near-perfect use of the touchscreen for number-entry and note taking – as well as providing a neat preview of how well the zoomed-in/zoomed-out presentation of the Opera browser may work. It's also accessible via the Quick Play mode which, tellingly, isn't for quick-fix gaming, but is a mode designed to help you sell *Brain Training* to your friends and family – not so much viral marketing as a voluntary epidemic willingly caught.





SYPHON FILTER: DARK MIRROR

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£23) RELEASE: NOW (US), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SONY DEVELOPER: SONY BEND



Sniper rifles don't come much more fully featured than *Dark Mirror's*. As well as standard shots, enemies can be perforated with electrifying darts, knocked out with gas pellets or hit with explosives that are detonated with a second tap of R





Arguably *Dark Mirror's* fiddliest task is aiming at enemies from this position, before popping out to open fire. But while you're covered, you're safe – giving you plenty of time to set your sights

Gabe Logan has a very satisfying way of kicking open doors. Double-tap up on the D-Pad and – thunk – that's *that* door shown. One in the eye for Sam Fisher, who, on PSP, can only step into a room the polite way. It's not the only *Syphon Filter: Dark Mirror* feature that makes Ubisoft Montreal's title seem rather less than essential.

This is unoriginal gaming. Rappelling, shuffling through tunnels, watching NPCs interact with drinks machines, IR goggles with the requisite whine: look into the mirror and you see *Splinter Cell* and *Metal Gear* gazing back. But Logan isn't one to tiptoe around. The frenetic, bite-sized missions are perfect for PSP, bursting with combat and highly detailed. Not before time, Sony has proved that PSP *can* run and gun with the big boys.

Hats off to Sony Bend for a brave control scheme, too – the face buttons pretend they're an analogue stick for the camera; the D-Pad passes itself off as a cluster of weapon select buttons. It works astonishingly well, inevitable aiming issues aside, and there's a satisfying fluidity to superspy manoeuvres like climbing on top of a box and cowering behind a wall. Proof of the pudding: we can't remember the last time we actually wanted to replay a training mode for a fast time.

There's good reason to revisit the standard missions, too: the Agency's number crunchers keep tabs on everything from your stealth kills to your headshots, unlocking bonus stages and new weapons which Gabe can haul into previous levels. Shades of *GoldenEye* and *Hitman*, then, and – crucially – Sony is aware that quick reloads and plentiful checkpoints are of utmost importance if repeated retries are the name of the game.

As with singleplayer, none of the multiplayer modes truly defy convention – but there's no better tonic for PSP owners fretting about the possibility of having to deathmatch in Liberty City forever. Objective,



Switching between multiple targets is so awkward as to be best ignored, but otherwise aiming is a hassle-free exercise. Note that Gabe is visibly weighed down with the mission kit: it's the little things that mean so much

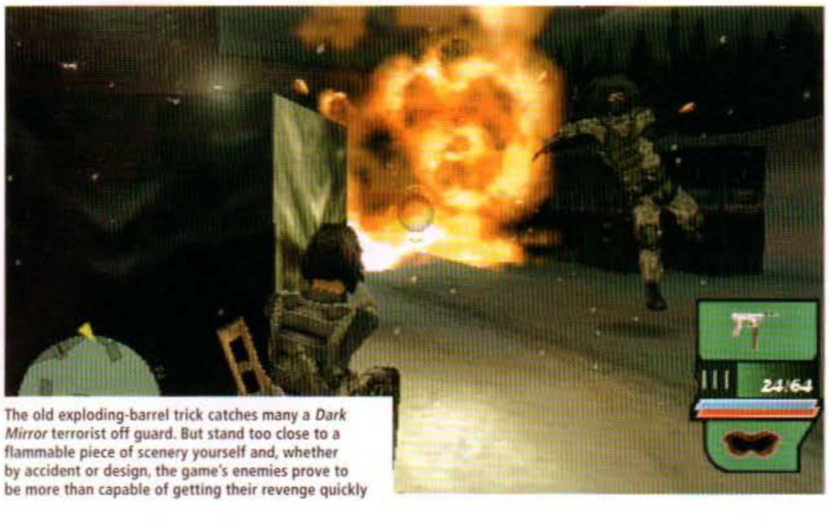
where terrorists battle to prevent the good guys decommissioning uranium and defusing bombs, is the standout game, but the experience as a whole is slickly done. Ad-hoc and Infrastucture are both supported, with voice chat, message boards, league tables and clan creation – the complete package.

Repitition lets *Dark Mirror* down. Wall-mounted laser traps mean you'll be viewing much of the game through the blue haze of the preposterously contrived EDSU goggles, which light up anything interactive. The swearing and 'partial nudity' is unlikely to win you friends among the elderly on the bus, either. But with Sam Fisher struggling and Solid Snake still playing card tricks, Gabe Logan has chosen the right time to emerge from the shadows a new man. It's a mirror that gives PSP detractors a good reason to reflect. **[7]**

Goggle box



Scopes are crucial in *Dark Mirror*. In training – where Logan conveniently pretends to be a rookie for the purposes of the exercise – a door combination daubed on the wall in nightvision-friendly paint introduces you to the importance of your various sets of goggles. In normal missions it's more often switches and locks that prove invisible to the naked eye. Later, there are some clever scope-specific setpieces, such as when a helpful technician crawling in the ceiling is cornered by those pesky terrorists, and the IR scope is the only means of pinpointing the attackers and gunning them down. Perhaps Sony Bend could have combined functions – with no less than four sets of goggles to hand, it's easy to waste time switching back and forth between views as though TV channel-surfing – but gadget fans and Sam Fisher groupies will be more than satisfied with Logan's haul from the Agency optician.



The old exploding-barrel trick catches many a *Dark Mirror* terrorist off guard. But stand too close to a flammable piece of scenery yourself and, whether by accident or design, the game's enemies prove to be more than capable of getting their revenge quickly





BAITO HELL 2000

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: ¥5,040 (£25)
RELEASE: NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

The genre-defining success of *Wario Ware* has perhaps put an unfair taint on all future minigame collections, and serves as a constant benchmark against which they'll be judged, but it's clear from the very first moments of *Baito Hell* that it stands in defiant opposition of everything *Wario Ware* represents. Rather than putting the player on a successive course of three-second, one-button games from a selection of hundreds, *Baito Hell* presents 40 one-button games, each meant to be played continuously for hours.

That's an over-generalisation, of course, but not by much: *Baito*'s minigames are primarily designed to capture the bleak monotony of farcical part-time jobs ranging from mildly annoying to utterly mind-numbing, for which you're rewarded an appropriately pitiful pay cheque either by successful completion or your own exasperated walkout. The money you earn can then be squandered, in true disaffected slacker style, on ¥100 to ¥5,000 vending machines, which drop anything from cheap plastic trinkets to, more rarely, a new unlockable minigame. It quickly becomes clear that the real tension in *Baito Hell* comes not from mastery of each particular game,



The look of each of the games varies wildly, from the pixellated and parodic to the awkwardly photorealistic, but all are tied together by a firm emphasis on the grotesque. Each game can be played in a Marathon mode, which generates a password for internet ranking on the game's site

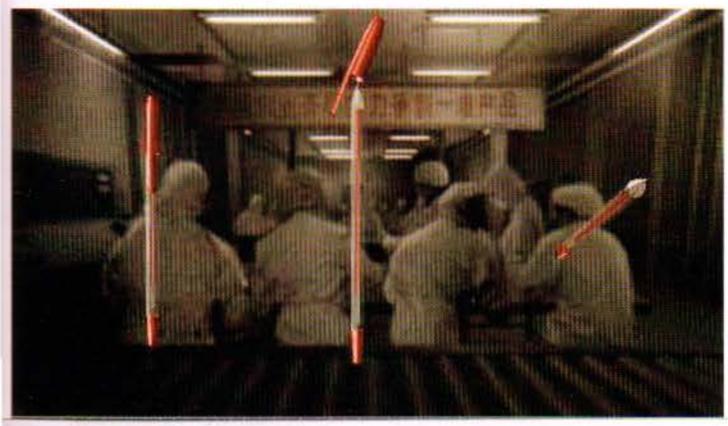
but in how sardonically all the chips are intentionally stacked against the player.

But curiously, it's a formula that's not altogether unsatisfying. As a slice-of-life commentary on the world of disenfranchised, money-scrounging 20-something geeks, it's frequently hilarious: some of its more creative games involve endless menu-driven retro-RPG battles, bouncing stage-rushing crowd-surfers at a rock show, leading peace-rally protestors away from riot police, and scavenging balls from an *Everybody's Golf* course for pennies apiece, where the discovery of a single yen is given a fanfare of unbelievable fortune. Cynically keeping players from enjoying themselves too much, the games that are most fun to play pay the worst, or refuse to pay at all upon failure, making blister-forming one-button drudgery the most reliable way to advance.

Like a horrible song that won't come unstuck from your head, *Baito Hell*'s gameplay is compulsive without necessarily being compelling. It takes a special sort of tenacity to appreciate what it offers, but so long as you're able to keep laughing at the fact that the joke is always on you, it's not entirely without its own reward. **[6]**



It's not at all uncommon to spend a solid hour in the dreary slums of a Biro plant fitting cap upon successive cap for a measly wage, only to then completely fritter it away on useless junk toys and duplicate games, at which point all that's left to do is start it all over again



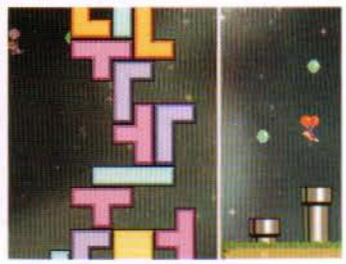


TETRIS DS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: £30 RELEASE: NOW (US), APRIL 21 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE



The retro display changes to a different level (or game) after every ten lines. Nothing you do has an effect on what's up top: it's all just eye candy, despite the fact that your eyes have enough to deal with



Tower Tetris, a mile-high tower where blocks are nudged into position while gravity pulls on them, pays lip service to the touchscreen and stylus. It's uninspiring, but made us dream about Jenga DS

So much for 'The Russian Game'. *Tetris DS* is very much a Nintendo title, awash with pastel pixels from the company's ever-present past. Forgive it this indulgence: Nintendo is rescuing us from six years of THQ-published 'improvements' such as non-saveable high scores, plotlines, and the notorious 'infinite spin'.

But hold on. That last one's apparently here to stay. The ability to once again freeze pieces in mid-drop will hit some 'Tetrinauts' (THQ again) like a punch in the gut. The same goes for being able to see six pieces ahead. And, for the first time, the mutations are fatal – DS's GBC incompatibility means that simply returning to the untarnished *Tetris DX* isn't an option. For us, these 'problems' (such as pieces beginning their descent off the top of the screen) are trifling nuisances. You might disagree. Don't say you weren't warned.

Or stick to multiplayer, where *Tetris DS* shines – and anyone exploiting those controversial features is doomed to failure. Battle Tetris, with power-ups that swing matches back and forth, rocks with a frenetic competitive spirit to rival *Bust-A-Move*. Exploiting wifi, local link-up and game sharing is expected from Nintendo – but so is the grim inevitability that only certain combinations of games and players are possible. Tenplayer *Tetris* is an offline event only. Still: compulsive simplicity makes *Tetris* and the DS's online functionality perfect partners.

Reaching out to the world also brings out the best in some of *Tetris DS*'s formula fiddles. Not all of them: Catch Tetris – a literal twist, where it's essentially the well that's spinning rather then the blocks – simply hurts, and the ostensibly relaxing Tower Tetris is ruined by surprising touchscreen troubles. But Mission mode and Push Tetris's tug-of-war are at least worth a look. Especially as, besides a couple of distracting puzzle modes, that's all you get: *Tetris DS* should *celebrate* the game, but instead feels hollow with its shortfall of rewards and bonuses.

The other disappointment, oddly, is everything Nintendo. The music is inane; slapdash retro stylings lead to at least one screen where actual *text* clutters the well's background; and you'd think from Battle mode's ugly power-up icons that Nintendo had never attempted to draw a red shell or a banana skin before. Perhaps that violin-playing Samus from NES *Tetris* wasn't so bad, after all. **[7]**


THE NOMAD SOUL

TIME EXTEND

THE NOMAD SOUL

FORMAT: **DC, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE DATE: **1999**







How do you ensnare savvy gamers in a dysfunctional world that purposefully keeps them behind the screen, distant yet close by?

It was during **David Bowie**'s self-awarded year off that Quantic Dream – "a couple of French charmers and an Irishman," as he would later remember – requested his knack for reinvention be applied to their videogame. Conceptually, *The Nomad Soul* might have seemed a statement of the obvious, that the lot of gamers is to wander nomadically from one imagined universe to the next, from one character incarnation to another. But the journey through Omikron, the thought-policed, decadent hive, criticised widely for its mechanical infrastructure, was anything but familiar.

Had it been exclusively either a vanity project for Bowie and his friends or a wildly ambitious experiment for David Cage, it would have been half the game it was. Instead *The Nomad Soul* was a collision of wills and a contest of ideas. The creative friction between its authors established for it an desire to break boundaries of depth and scale in videogames, the other eyeing the medium as a fitting stage for progressive performance art. Luckily, the ideals of Cage, based as they were in the highly mechanised world of game development, also imbued Omikron with a conservatism that chimes off the freely rebellious sentiments of Bowie. The often awkward puzzles, movements and interactions that transpired in its high-rises, catacombs and streets were, as it happened, vital to the characterisation of its stolid society.

Perhaps unwittingly, then, Omikron stages a clash between the machinery of 3D gaming, as embodied by the city's cool and repressive government computer Ix, and the inevitably disruptive influence of an outsider embodied by Boz, Bowie's autobiographical digital dissident, and his physical-world counterparts The Dreamers (see 'Beggars' belief'). As

"What does it matter if I die? It's only a video game," says your avatar when confronted with the game's first titanic gob of exposition

unorthodox, captivating balance that, from a technical standpoint, is better appreciated now than it was in 1999. The versatility of Quantic's proprietary engine means it can run at higher resolutions than many current games would dare attempt while its texture scaling, as aided by a particularly well-rendered library of original assets, is stubbornly attractive. But how, with a notoriously tight save system and action anachronistic even then, does the game still possess gravity?

Ethnic diversity may be Omikron's leading architectural trait (its social model arguably born more of reference to Logan's Run, THX 1138 and Blade Runner than any real-world example), but the game's strength as an interactive experience stems more from an ideological pluralism. It's a tale of two Davids, in fact, one with a hopelessly hackneyed as the game's tale of soul-stealing and demonic possession is, a more substantial theme resonates throughout on the aforementioned, more organic level. Moreover, the inputs of Bowie, fashion designer wife Iman and musical collaborator Reeves Gabrels feel so dismissive of gaming formulae that they shore up the game's potentially trifling identity. Omikron is championed as a very *real* place by fans of *The Nomad Soul*, and realism in this case doesn't necessarily mean accuracy, sophistication or believability.

"What does it matter if I die? It's only a video game," says your avatar (we use no character names as, by this point, you may already have assumed another) when confronted with the game's first titanic gob of exposition. "You're wrong," is the reply. "This



Qalisar, the second district to open its doors and accessible from the outset, reflects the David Cage side of *The Nomad Soul's* artistic tussle. With its exotic dancers, sex shops and devious bartenders, it's a popular 'real-world' fantasy for developers





BEGGARS' BELIEF

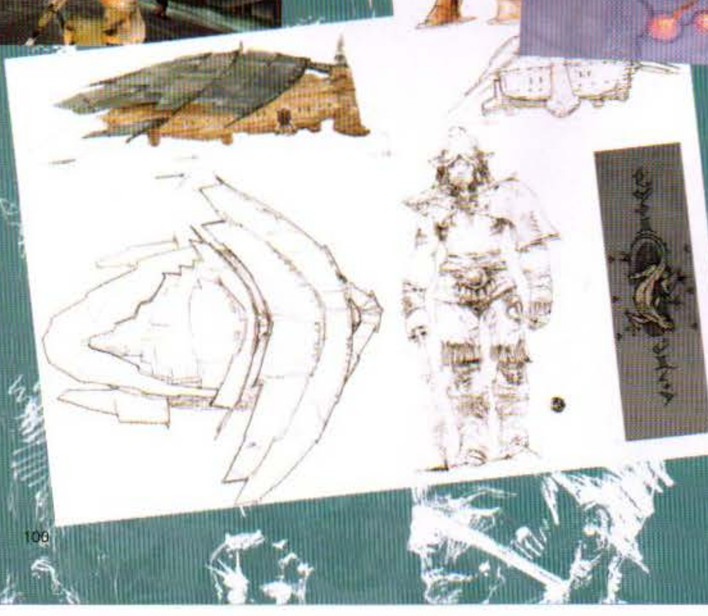
The supreme self-indulgence of *The Nomad Soul* isn't confined to the shelves of its libraries, its satire-heavy commercial airwaves or the contents of its countless cupboards. The greatest breaks it offers from your actual mission (and again these only add to its peculiar allure) are the live performances of The Dreamers, the elusive band of free-thinking beggars that bring Bowie's Hours album to life in a way that neither the game's domestic audio players or, indeed, the man himself could. Though early attempts at motion capture were one of the game's big sells, the polygonised versions of Bowie, Gabrels and collaborator Gail-Ann Dorsey judder and pivot like no earthly creature. Omikron's steadfast removal from our world, however, turns such crudity into novelty.



universe is just as real as yours." The genius of an otherwise juvenile premise – that the arch-demon Astaroth has secretly governed Omikron for years so as to swell his Reservoir Of Souls, distributing *his own videogame* across parallel universes to entrap more soul-strong players – is in this positioning of its world not only outside of ours, but through a looking glass of videogame technology. Most alternate realities offer an excuse to manufacture the extraordinary – *The Nomad Soul's* allows it to also shrug off the ridiculous with ease.

So, presented with the Venetian canals of Lahoreh, the red light district of Qalisar, the Moroccan backstreets of Jaunpur and the abundant technical shortfalls that distance them all from planet Earth, we choose to seek out what they *do* offer rather than what their flickering textures and dense fogs suggest they can't. It sounds like a triumph of art design, but while that certainly plays its part, this game achieves more through something both Cevat Yerli and Gary Penn identified last issue as an under-documented discipline: information design. What makes this especially interesting is that by most of the accepted standards of signposting *The Nomad Soul* is an expository mess. It prioritises a passive assimilation of tidbits about the people, places and past of Omikron far above the more pressing acquisition of mission-specific tip-offs. This is a failure on a most crucial front and yet this game, frowned upon by critics for that very reason, seems strangely impervious.





"Sometimes the best stories," Bowie also remarked, "are not the ones you think you've told, but those that are discovered in the telling." As if to complement this, achievement and incentive in *The Nomad Soul* are centred entirely upon discovery, something commonly integrated into a wider array of gaming sweeteners including risk/reward and basic dextrous challenge. Considering the game's self-professed inclusive nature, touting both firstperson shooting and single-plane brawling as key features, this is surprising, not to mention unwise. But to borrow a term that Bowie applied to his own BowieNet community, Omikron is a 'sticky' place. As you explore, you pick things up that weren't necessarily advertised on the way in, and as you plough the sword Barkaya'l into Astaroth's upturned back (following what must be one of the most accursed endgames that has ever been produced), you look back over a very personal and almost intimate journey.

It's the same philosophy that inspires those loath to follow the MMO grind to wander regardless through World Of WarCraft, searching for inspiration, not inventory

It's the same philosophy that inspires those loath to follow the MMO grind to wander regardless through *World Of WarCraft*, searching for inspiration rather than inventory. Likewise, there's no delusion of permanence in either *The Nomad Soul* or the roles it has in store for you. Passing between characters retains neither cash collected nor skills acquired. The game's unnecessarily obtrusive inventory seems less an item management system than another indulgent model of real-life clutter, filling inexorably with neglected Transcon audio recordings, Kloops beers never to be opened, and a decomposing salad.

This prompts interesting questions about the nature of the game's roleplay. Does it offer a wealth of identities in its 40 inhabitable citizens,



Effusive dialogue is a prime *Nomad Soul* indulgence, often spilling over the widescreen bars of cutscenes and providing more a history lesson than guidance



Early conversation trees suggest a purposeful division of responses into those suited to initial character Kay'l 669, an upstanding Omikronian security officer, and the more natural queries of an outsider dropped without ceremony into another person's body. Settling into the role of action hero, however – tossing coins to beggars and giving the benefit of the doubt to penitent female suspects – only adds to a feeling of severance when the game shifts gear









or actually none at all? After all, with every reincarnation spell cast we simply override whatever demeanour a given character has with an open channel for our own.

You could say that many games operate similarly – *Half-Life* being an example where the line between Gordon Freeman and yourself is practically invisible – but even there you inherit a degree of roleplay from the character's background, reputation and circumstance. *The Nomad Soul* – a Multiple Role Playing Game, you might say – offers nothing beyond a couple of lines of character background, an occasional apartment key and a skin. It entices you to assume the role of security officer Kay'l 669 for an opening couple of hours, then snatches it from you and sets you adrift, unexpectedly torn as you face the new realities and unrealities the game proceeds to toss at you with almost negligent ease.

Is it the case, then, that the only character you ever truly adopt is that of Omikron itself, an imprisoned city remembering and indeed saving itself subjectively through its people? Perhaps, if you clutch deep enough. But whether you choose to find significance in its approach or not, *The Nomad Soul's* defining quality is that at no point do you feel like you're really there as an identity on Omikron's streets, and yet it remains entirely possible to see it as a home. It's one of the most immersive *and* distancing experiences that gaming has produced, and somewhere in that it finds more personality than can be thrown up by even some the most characterised tales.

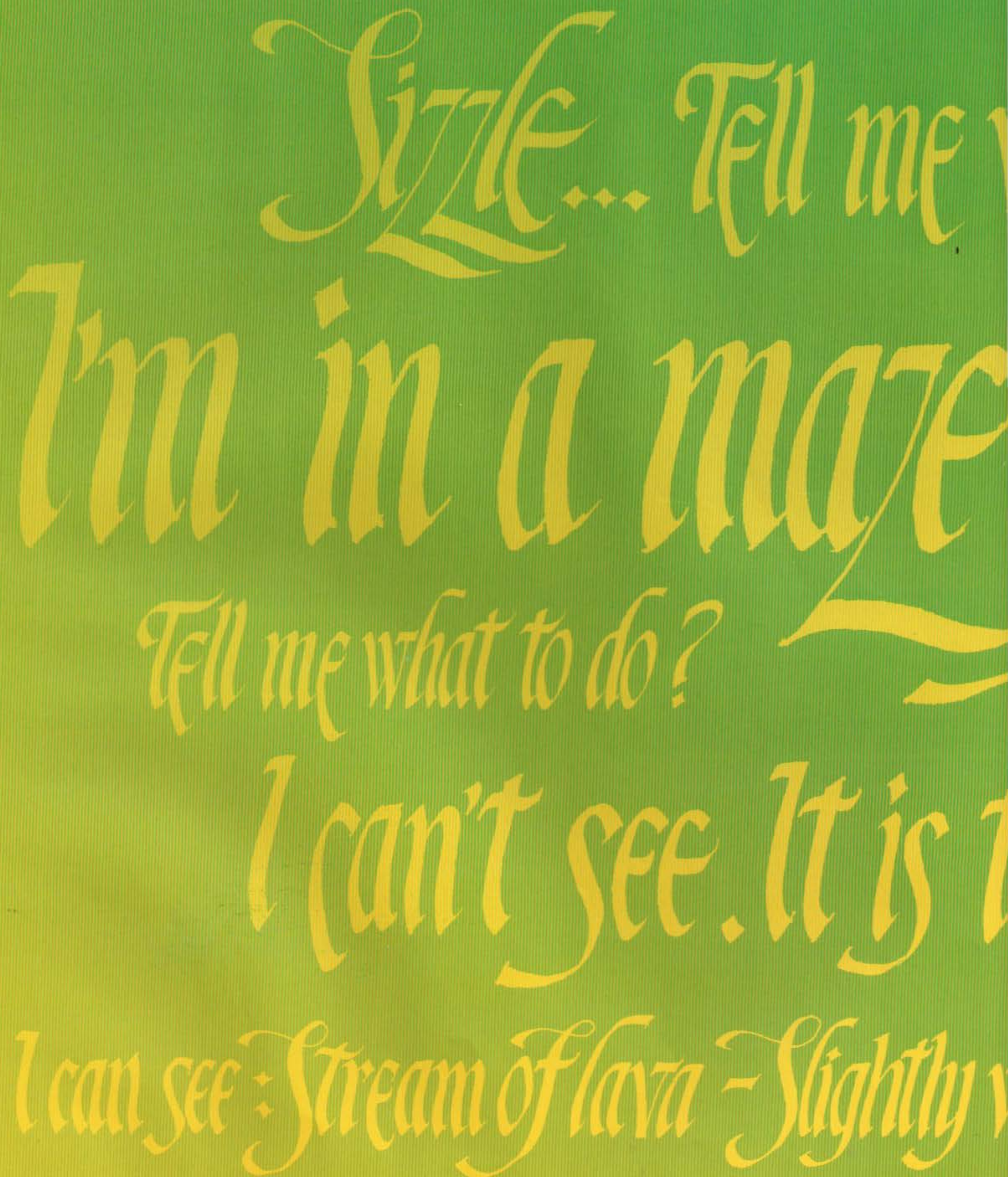


DISTANT KARMA

With its distinct beginning, middle and end, the story of *The Nomad Soul* isn't likely to be continued in spiritual successor *Omikron Karma*. Cage's resistance in calling the new game – currently in development for one or more of the next-generation consoles – a true sequel may suggest an absence of the first game's prize asset: David Bowie. Quantic's ambition is undiminished, however, with Cage having stressed that fans shouldn't expect a release any time before 2009. The status of the 'interactive drama' *Infraworld*, meanwhile, once confirmed as a pre-*Karma* project, is now more of a mystery.







Sizle... Tell me
I'm in a maze
Tell me what to do?
I can't see. It is
I can see: Stream of lava - Slightly

hat to do? Light lamp
of pits
o dark.
ry bear

THE MAKING OF... ADVENTURELAND

A world of adventure awaited those prepared to answer that persistent line: 'Tell me what to do?'

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **TRS-80** PUBLISHER: **ADVENTURE INT** DEVELOPER: **SCOTT ADAMS** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1978**

In the beginning was the word. That was all that the black-and-white monitor attached to **Scott Adams**' Tandy TRS-80 could display. Yet with a few sparse lines of text he created a world rich in atmosphere and alive with possibilities. By cramming this early 'interactive fiction', a style of game previously only playable on a mainframe computer, into the limited memory of a micro, he spearheaded one of the most fruitful genres of early home computing and, in founding a company to publish his games, he kickstarted the thirdparty software business. An adventure was indeed about to start.

In the beginning, a voice boomed out: 'Welcome to Adventure number 1: *Adventureland*'. The journey to that opening forest location began a decade earlier, though, with a simple tic-tac-toe game Adams hacked out on an IBM/360. By the mid '70s he was shooting down aliens masquerading as letters on a homebrew computer he and his brother had constructed from bit-slice CPU chips. His refusal to allow technical limitations to hold back his creativity was further evident with his next project.

"I built a Sphere personal computer from a kit and then designed an add-on video card for it that let me do black-and-white bitmapped graphics," Adams recalls. "I programmed a tank battle game and made two controllers for it, with a pair of levers and a fire button – it was a ton of fun to play. In fact, I won the first 'What do I use my Sphere computer for?' contest."

> "I built a Sphere personal computer from a kit and then designed a video card for it that let me do black-and-white graphics"

It was a question Adams would return to when he acquired a TRS-80 Model 1 in 1978 and pondered how he might utilise the string function contained in the machine's Microsoft BASIC. The answer came once he discovered *Colossal Caves* – a refinement of the original text game *Adventure!* – on the DEC mainframe at work.

"I was hooked. I would come in early and stay late to play it. What the creators, Willie



SCOTT FREE

Adams was refreshingly open about the language he designed to produce his games. He wrote a cover article for Byte magazine in 1980 explaining how the interpreter worked, and almost included the full code list, which documented what every command did.

"My wife at the time, Alexis, talked me out of it and said I should keep it secret, which I did," recalls Adams. "I did publish the game and database, though, and there were some intrepid folks who actually copied it all in by hand. Of course, there were misprints in the article and it must have taken some work on their parts to get it going."

Adams also shared his adventure-writing secrets with British programmer Brian Howarth, who produced the *Mysterious Adventures* series. "He basically took what I taught him and used it without permission. I hold no grudges against him. I haven't seen him in 20 years and hope he's doing well."

Does the 'M' in MS Adams stand for 'magnanimous'?

Crowther and Don Woods, did was just phenomenal and it was the prime impetus that got me writing adventure games."

Adams had his inspiration, but no access to the source code. Even if he had, staring at 300K of Fortran and then eyeing up the 16K available on his humble micro may well have resulted in him shaking his head and giving up before he began. Many of his friends and colleagues suggested he do just that, but Adams ignored them and instead set about creating his own language.

"As a system programmer, I knew how to write tools. I developed the language, then an interpreter to understand the language, and a third tool allowed me to develop a database for the interpreter to access."

The simple two-word verb-noun parser he fashioned sat snugly in the restricted memory of the Tandy, and Adams could fashion his gameworld. Aware of the meagre descriptions a limited word count would allow, he deliberately chose locations that worked in shorthand. Forests, caverns and swamps could instantly conjure up vivid images in the minds of those raised on Tolkien and Dungeons & Dragons, and indeed the minimal wording encouraged players to apply their own colour. Soon, you could visualise your treasure pile gleaming in the hollow stump, smell the soil and feel the expanse of the bottomless hole while perched on its rim.



The author alongside 'Igor', as seen in the Collector's Edition of his adventures

Players also had to apply their deductive powers to solve some ingenious puzzles in their quest to collect and safely store 13 treasures scattered across the 33 locations. It was a challenge, certainly, but the game was full of clues and pointers to aid the inexperienced adventurer.

"*Adventureland* was written from the start to be player friendly. I wanted folks to be able to play through and feel good about having been able to do so. I didn't want to make it achievable by only a limited few, plus I think all the clues should be there from the start, so if the player is clever enough to figure it out, it's possible to play right through from the beginning without dying. That's hard to write, but to my mind makes a better adventure."

Hints could be culturally specific – the magic word 'Bunyon' etched on an axe, which transports a treasure to 'Paul's Place', refers to the mythical Paul Bunyon of American folklore, a 'lumberjack of epic proportions'. They could draw on bad puns, as in the reference to the 'damn lava' concealing something more valuable, or call on the pantomime conventions of rusty lamps and Persian rugs. A consistent logic is ever present, though – a lit lamp burns fuel that will require replenishing, a mirror dropped on a hard surface will smash – and all could be tackled through careful reading of the text, some lateral thinking and the occasional random act of bestiality...

"That was not intentional," laughs Adams. "To save memory, my interpreter only used the first three letters of the English words to identify them. To get past the bear, you could 'Yell' at him or 'Scream' at him and some people got so fed up they typed in 'Screw Bear' and got the standard response: 'The bear is so startled he fell off the ledge'."

Inter-species affection aside, a strong sense of morality pervaded the game. The Genie of the Lamp would punish the greedy, the dragon was to be scared, not slain, and even the bear managed to survive his startled plunge (you encounter the beast later, in a chasm, alive but 'slightly woozy').

"I was raising a young family when I wrote *Adventureland*," Adams explains. "I wanted to make a game that was totally



The Commodore 64 packaging boasted 'superb graphics', although *Adventureland*'s locations were hardly state of the art for the platform. Besides, many players preferred to turn off the visuals, letting their imaginations fill in the blanks instead





The VIC-20 cartridge (left), with Smaug-inspired boxart. Adams: "People said we'd never squeeze the game on to the VIC. But we did." The VIC couldn't deliver graphics like these, though (above)



RETURN TO TEXT

In response to years of hopeful requests from fans asking if he might produce a new adventure, in 2000 Adams released *Return to Pirate's Island Part 2*, an update of a game previously only available on the TI-994a. "I've sold a few thousand copies and people seem to have enjoyed it," Adams says, modestly. "I'm currently writing an adventure based on the Old Testament of the Bible, *The Inheritance*, though I haven't done any work on it for a year or so. I really need to get back to it."

To track progress on *The Inheritance*, visit www.msadams.com, where you can also revisit *Pirate's Island* via download. Or, of course, you could just 'Say YOHO'.

family friendly, that kids could play with their parents. It wasn't about violence or killing. I want everything I do to be positive and uplifting."

Adventureland may have been wholesome, but it was not without humour. Players aimlessly roaming the maze of pits could stumble into the memory chip of a computer, a 'neat little joke' for those lost in his virtual world. More audaciously, Adams included the first recorded example of in-game advertising. A large hoarding at one location urged players to pester their favourite computer dealer for the next game in the series, *Pirate Adventure*, and even gave a phone number to call if their haranguing proved to be unsuccessful.

"That was actually my home phone number, though later I transferred it to be the main contact number for my company," reveals Adams. "Yeah, of course people rang. That was the intention. And then I sold them the game direct!"

Guerrilla marketing is perhaps to be expected from a man who pioneered the whole notion of thirdparty software publishing. Initially selling by mail order through adverts in TRS-80 user magazine Softside, he progressed to supplying Radio Shack retailers with his product, complete with some rather resourceful packaging.

"It took me a while to figure out a cheap way to package the game. I ended up using my daughter's baby bottle liners with the tape and a special folded business card stapled to the top and drilled to hang on pegboard. Instant packaging!"

"I had mail saying: 'I liked the text. My pictures look better than yours'. Your mind gives a better picture than the finest artist"

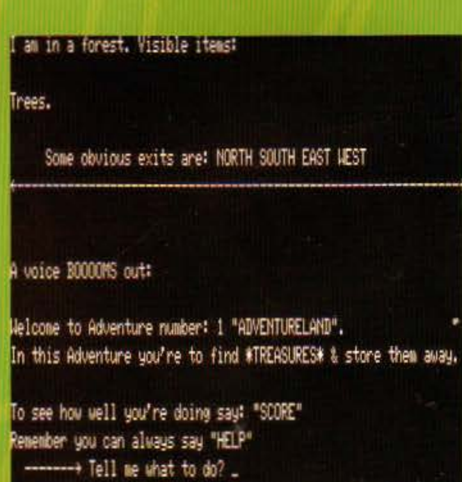
His company, Adventure International, continued to grow and became a major presence in the industry, publishing a further 14 Adams-authored adventures and a diverse range of titles from other programmers (he mentions *Galactic Empire*, coded by a young Doug Carlson who went on to found Broderbund Software). The company's back catalogue boasts a slightly less meritorious legacy too, with its Hulk and Spiderman tie-ins. A dozen superhero games were planned, but the series was cut short when the company fell victim to the industry crash of the mid-'80s. Licensed games, however, survived and flourished.

The language Adams had developed lived on, too, in his subsequent work. He later rewrote the interpreter in assembler rather than BASIC, added new features as his adventures grew in complexity, and eventually expanded the system to support full sentence input. As the capabilities of the host machines improved (his games appeared on just about every computer of the day), so graphics were added, an inclusion not to everyone's taste: "I had mail saying: 'I liked the text better. My pictures look better than yours'. Your mind gives a better picture than the finest artist."

This is perhaps his greatest achievement. Adams' games could place enduring images in the minds of players and have a lasting effect on those who ventured in.

"I still get on average one or two emails a day from new fans and I'm always amazed at how my games have touched people. I've been told how people owe jobs, careers and even marriages to my games. I was once contacted by a woman whose terminally ill mother asked if they could play *Adventureland* one last time, as she'd so many happy memories of the hours spent in the game."

With *Adventureland*, Adams created his own persistent gameworld. And all with a few well chosen words.



The opening of the original TRS-80 version, where it all began. You haven't adventured until you've done it in white on black

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Midway Studios – Newcastle Ltd

DATE FOUNDED: 1996 (acquired by Midway in 2005)

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 56

STUDIO HEAD: Tony Parkes (below)



URL: www.midway.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY
LA Rush (PS2, Xbox)







The *Rush* series dates back to the PlayStation and N64 in 1998, and has also appeared in arcades



LOCATION:
Newcastle
(Tyne And Wear)

CURRENT PROJECTS:
The Wheelman (PS3, Xbox 360), *LA Rush* (PSP)

ABOUT THE STUDIO

"The Pitbull Syndicate was founded as a specialised driving game studio in 1996 by a small group of programmers and artists. The company went on to create four instalments in the *Test Drive* franchise, *Big Air*, *Demolition Racer* and *LA Rush*. Realising the studio's potential for future growth Midway Games Inc acquired the studio in 2005 and tasked it with creating *Rush* PSP and *The Wheelman* (PS3/360), a groundbreaking action-entertainment property starring Vin Diesel and created in collaboration with Tigon Studios, Midway, MTV Films, Paramount Pictures and MTV Games.

"MTV Films and Paramount pictures have purchased the rights to develop a major motion picture based on the videogame starring Vin Diesel and written by Rich Wilkes, who worked with Diesel on xXx. Wilkes will also lend his talents to Midway Studios – Newcastle by writing the story for the game."

"Midway Games has committed to developing 'fewer, bigger, better' games. To help accomplish this goal the company is using Unreal Tech 3 for all its future projects. This allows us to focus our efforts on game play and polish instead of devoting most of our cycle to developing technology. This fits in well with the Newcastle Studios mantra: 'Work smarter, not harder'. As a studio we are dedicated to maximising productivity, good planning, communication and hiring dedicated and passionate people."





The PSP version of *LA Rush* will offer 50 vehicles – and the potential to total them

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

Making games the PS3 way

Sony's DevStation 06 conference saw European developers gearing up to get their games ready for launch velocity



Paul Holman, vice president of technology at Sony Computer Entertainment Europe



Andy Beveridge, director, SN Systems

Whenever new gaming hardware arrives, there's always a rush to see exactly how developers are getting to grips with the system. What's often forgotten, however, is that the hardware manufacturers are also learning the ropes. With new consoles pushing the boundaries of consumer electronics thanks to a mixture of multicore processors, high-spec disc drives plus broadband-enabled operating systems and architectures, that scope is becoming a massive issue. And this is both in terms of internal research and development as well as trying to pass on that information to developers. Hence Sony's DevStation conference. Generally held every two years, it's the place where developers come together to get the latest heads-up on the tools and techniques Sony and its middleware partners are cooking up.

Of course, with PlayStation 3 due for a winter launch there's plenty to learn, especially for those developers keen to hit the launch release schedule. The issue isn't so much the technology but getting publishers to invest in game development outside of their internal studios. Still, as Sony's vice president of technology **Paul Holman** explains, at least where Sony is concerned, fostering innovation remains key.

"Of course we have the big boys such as EA at DevStation, but we have enough PlayStation 3 devkits available, maybe even ten times more at this stage than with PlayStation 2, to be able to spread them around to studios who are just starting out," he claims. "We're looking for talent. You want a bedrock of launch titles but you also want to plant some speculative seeds for the future." And with Sony promising to launch its own version of Xbox Live's Marketplace for downloadable, simple, arcade-style games, getting new talent into the development ecology is becoming increasingly important. As for the question of how complete the current

Taking a gamble on PlayStation 3? There were plenty of European developers getting up to speed on Sony's new hardware, with the focus on programming tools

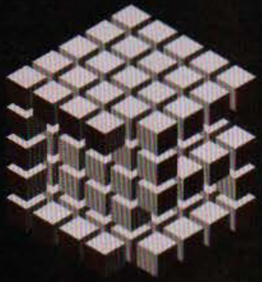








As well as Sony's own lectures, some of the leading middleware and tools companies, such as Havok and Kynogon, were on hand to show off their latest PS3 tech



devkits are, Holman says Sony's taking an iterative approach. "We're already on to our seventh iteration," he reveals. "Even the first releases had a Cell processor in them and we've built up the other components since then. The RSX graphics followed a couple of months ago. Before then people had a current Nvidia board so developers always had real hardware to play with." The next big component will be the Blu-ray drives; up to this point developers have been emulating the process using standard DVD units.

"Even without finished hardware it's been possible to get game levels up and running," Holman stresses. "It's just a matter of optimisation and giving developers the confidence that whatever they develop will able to run on the finalised consumer unit."

But Sony's support isn't just about hardware – there's plenty of software support too. There have been two major library releases, with the PlayStation Graphics Library (PSGL), a solid but slow solution, providing the initial framework. It's since been joined by a more low-level release, LibGCM.

"What's important about PSGL is that we've given out the source code so developers can can get things up and running quickly on PlayStation 3, as well as porting it to other consoles, and we're fine with that," says Holman. "We particularly wanted to help out the more medium-sized developers and we've seen them ripping apart the code and using it in real games."

Hand in hand with this process come the programming tools from SN Systems. Bought by Sony in 2005, the Bristol-based company is now concentrating its 40-strong team on making sure PlayStation 3 developers have the best programming, debugging and build tools available.

"It's taken us a little while to figure out how to work with Sony," confesses **Andy Beveridge**, SN Systems' director. "It's almost at the stage now where there's too much information so we have to be selective about what we're working on and focus on the aspects we think will make the most difference."

"Developers know PS3 will be around for years, so it's worthwhile really learning how to use it"

One area of this effort is the company's signature Tuner product, which enables programmers to spot bottlenecks in their code. It's currently in an alpha stage but should become widely available during the next couple of months. Sony's also been quick to release the first version of its Performance Analyser Suite (PA Suite), which takes the process a step further by providing feedback on how the compiled code is actually running on PlayStation 3 hardware. Used together, they should at least make sure the slate of PlayStation 3 launch titles contain plenty of optimised eye candy, even if true innovation will be delayed for more considered releases.

"There are degrees to which developers will use the hardware to begin with," reckons Holman. "They could just use the main PPU (Power Processing Unit) and one or two of the SPUs (Synergistic Processor Units), probably for physics. The main thing about PlayStation 3 is it's futureproof. "Developers know the system will be around for years, so it's worthwhile really learning how to use it, and we'll always have more software to help them. But at the end of the day, what really matters is the games." This was the message the developers took home with them – along with the devkits, of course.



Including SCEE's VP of technology Paul Holman (pictured), other senior Sony executives talking at DevStation included vice president of thirdparty publisher relations Zeno Colado. President and CEO David Reeves was also present

www.technology.scee.net



DevStation was a concentrated slug of hardcore information about how to get the most out of PlayStation 3's complex hardware, with sections on coding shortcuts, audio tricks and graphics techniques

Seven become six

If more proof was needed of the sheer complexity of PlayStation 3 as a piece of computing hardware, the news that another of Cell's SPUs has 'gone missing' was the clincher. The original design of Cell had one general Power Processor working with eight so-called Synergistic Processing Units (SPUs) to create the all-singing, all-dancing CPU. Initial yield problems saw Sony downgrade Cells for PlayStation 3 to seven SPUs in order to be able to manufacture the three million plus units required for its simultaneous global launch. Since then, however, the demands of running security procedures on the always-online machine, as well as operating system overheads, has meant that another SPU has fallen by the wayside, although Sony hopes to reduce the overhead in time. Interestingly, Microsoft runs similar security and OS tasks on two of Xbox 360's three cores, so this isn't only a Cell issue.

Ironically, though, developers (let alone gamers) won't notice the difference for years. Such is the programming complexity of handling the parallel processors, it will be surprising if any first-generation PlayStation 3 titles use more than a couple of SPUs, and even then it will probably be thanks to the sterling efforts of physics middleware companies (such as Havok), which are rapidly trying to port their engines over to SPU mode.

There's plenty of optimisation wiggle room available. Indeed, if developers want to get really down and dirty, they'll even be able optimise their code to run smartly using the Cell's Interconnect Bus. A four-way architecture, two channels work clockwise and two anti-clockwise, which means if they are exceptionally clever, programmers can gain fast access to memory from certain chips as well as using spare capacity on each channel to double or even triple their data throughput. Unfortunately it's currently so complicated to carry out, it would be sensible not to expect any games to use those techniques until PlayStation 4 is announced. Maybe that's what Sony means when it says PlayStation 3 is futureproof.



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Notes from the videogame designer's workshop

Journey's end

I was recently reminded that I have been playing computer and videogames forever – well, pretty much since they appeared in public over 30 years ago (and over 20 of those years from within 'the industry').

In that time, the medium's grown from a novelty into hobbyist and cottage industries and ultimately become just another capitalist venture – not to mention more acceptable and influential in the mainstream and artistic circles alike (although there is still plenty of stigma attached). The once idiosyncratic British business is certainly not what it was and what's left is predominantly American-owned.

Eeeh, I remember when all these were green screens. One moment man was walking on the moon, the next he'd opened a connection to virtual space and made first contact with white lines and rectangles in a whole new universe. Television in the home and videogames in amusement arcades were white man's magic enough. But when it became possible to send and receive broadcasts to and from virtual space from your own home, to allow your television to become possessed by compliant clusters of light... Man.

> One moment man was walking on the moon, the next he'd opened up a connection to virtual space and made first contact

For me, the innocent wide-eyed awe of a new medium quickly grew into acceptance and appreciation and then developed into a pastime: I became a player of 'television games', still revelling in the sheer miracle of it all but playing for entertainment alone.

Consoles came along, as did access to computers, and that's when the seeds of obsession were sown and the cravings started. Marvelling at and admiring who did what and how, easily pleased by even a single extreme (be it playable, visual, audible or technical), I wanted more, to know more – initially through making my own entertainment. As it became clear that game development in virtual space was the equivalent to building pyramids from grains of sand, I became more of a hardcore player. Playing to win, endeavouring to play everything, beat everything (and anyone), especially the most challenging, with scores as a measure of achievement, rather than reaching an end to provide satisfaction. From formal competition loser I became reviewer, now playing principally not for pleasure but to pass comment and advise others. A compulsion made career.

But playing more and more of the same became monotonous. I'd developed a refined palette, so I thought, so I sought out only the best and gave lip service to the rest, ascending a cone of perfection. The higher I climbed, the more the need for quality took second place to a yearning for originality – everything had to be different otherwise it was easily dismissed as unimaginative, lazy, derivative and worthless.

An advancement to magazine editor resulted in yet another change in play perspective: a focus on games mainly as a means of creating copy, to fittingly fill space to be shared with readers. This was followed by a transition to 'writer', writing manuals, box copy, advertising copy, press releases and text within play, which meant still not playing for pleasure but just enough to take what I needed to get a job done.

Cue burgeoning pretensions about the medium's meaning and potential for expression along with curiosity about 'the perfect game' (later evolving into less of a concern for what makes a game great and more of an interest in what makes a game full stop, pulling products to pieces to see how they worked and reassembling them but missing 'that certain something', like the steak passed through the telepods in The Fly).

Surprisingly, there's still no far-reaching, pragmatic play or game syntax to aid the creation of game development (nor appropriate tools). Similarly, I still haven't figured out how the Japanese can so often make a plausible and typically satisfying game out of anything (DJing, cooking, lawyers...), while in the west we tend to become self-absorbed with simulations that age badly (mind you, games don't tend to grow old gracefully, if not in any credible playable sense then certainly not aesthetically).

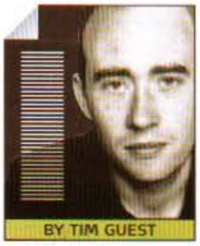
As a producer and publishing representative wanting more, yesterday, for less, I was a demanding player with more interest in play as a means to a SKU. Playing only to see what everyone else was doing, to see what should be done better and what shouldn't be done for the pleasure of others. That continued on the other side of the development fence, at first in a state of insular delusion, a notion of no cost spared to take the time to do it right, until maturity and the realisation that time is money struck. There are bills to be paid and so few players notice so much invisible effort anyway.

Now the illusions are stronger yet somehow more obvious, I play as a passing interest. The technology means nothing. There are no surprises. The medium is part of an established timeline. Computer and videogames are on an inevitable path, as am I atop my silly self-made perch waiting for a single divine moment: a game without obvious connections to the past; one I feel I couldn't have predicted; one that makes me feel under ten all over again.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki



Illustration: Lelukes



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Postcards from the online universe

Follow Saint Philip

At the beginning of my journey into virtual worlds, I hoped I would discover not only what they reveal about our selves, but also how they shape us. In the early 21st century, in the moribund grip of capitalism, we have choked our possible futures into a narrow spectrum of possibility. Choice is all; everything, even family and community, is subservient to a single belief: if we can select our surroundings, if we can choose what we do, where we live and who we meet, we can prevail. Money, the oil of our choice, has become the currency not only of our business transactions, but also of our dreams.

For millennia, mankind dreamed alone. Cinema brightened our dreams with a lightbulb, so everyone could see. Now virtual worlds have laid our dreams at our feet, like the patchwork quilt in Yeats' 'He wishes for the cloths of heaven' – for anyone else, not just our beloveds, to walk into and inhabit. Mankind has finally made its own worlds; and we, our own gods – the world's makers – walk among ourselves.

If money rules our dreams, it's no surprise that money rules virtual worlds too. Almost all the reporting that comes back through the electronic looking glass into mainstream media is about the money: the scale of the economies, the virtual, 'non-existent' objects that can be bought and sold for real cash. This reporting simplifies the revelatory capacity of virtual worlds, but there's a reason for this, too. It's not just that capitalism bribes every innovation to its own purpose, like an oil baron buying every last politician. It's also that the figures themselves do beggar belief. Last year, residents of *Second Life* (among the smallest, with 100,000 residents) traded $1.47 million worth of virtual property in a month. The yearly market across all virtual worlds is estimated at $1 billion. To put this into perspective, the movie Titanic earned a total domestic gross of $402.6 million. *World Of WarCraft* makes Blizzard a fifth of that every month.

Last month, I mentioned what has been christened the '*WOW* wave' – a surge of interested parties flocking to the money and hype surrounding new virtual worlds. It's a sign of the times that it's not a surprise to discover that virtual worlds have caught the attention of Hollywood, too. This month, Titanic director **James Cameron** has joined the *WOW* wave. He has announced his new film, an as-yet-unnamed "completely crazy, balls-out sci-fi flick", will be accompanied by a virtual world to be launched months beforehand, to allow people to inhabit the universe of the film before they even see it. Films, dreams, worlds: Cameron clearly believes, as I do (and as you should) that the three constructs are related. "I create worlds, too, though mine are narrative-oriented," he says.

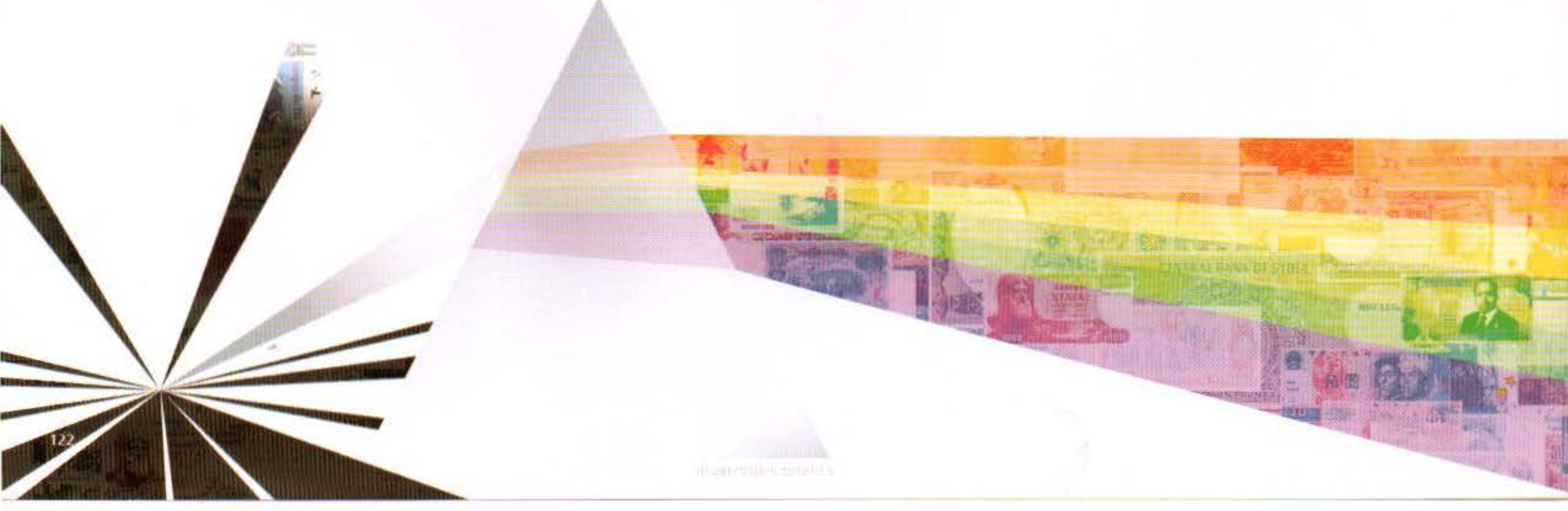
> Cinema brightened our dreams with a lightbulb, so everyone could see. Now virtual worlds have laid our dreams at our feet

In an interview with Business Online reporter Burt Helm, Cameron expounded on his desire to see players create their own worlds. "I want to see developers create games in which players can add to the worlds as they go along, so you can see what hundreds of thousands of people in this game environment can create.

"It's like each is being handed a tool set... Instead of creating a $50 million game, you're creating $2 million games and letting them grow themselves."

Cameron sees parallels between our new virtual worlds and literature, specifically science fiction. "So much of literary sci-fi is about creating worlds that are rich and detailed and make sense at a social level," he says. "They force people to be more imaginative." Right now, imagination is the thing we need most (even if Cameron, in his films, and in ignoring the fact that these resident-made worlds already exist, shows the lack of his). Philip K Dick, our most imaginative prophet of other worlds, would have loved all this. Dick's preoccupation, soon to be dramatised in Richard Linklater's version of his classic A Scanner Darkly, was with the ways we create our own realities and are both enlightened and isolated within them. In our real world, we are already both enlightened and isolated; these are desperate times, and our desperation is sure to spread to our virtual worlds too. (Last month, a *Second Life* resident was at the centre of a controversy that, in a straw poll, over 70 per cent of the world's residents had a strong opinion on. His controversial act was to put up posters questioning George W Bush's competency.) Dick, in turn, was a desperate man. His schizoid visions diagnosed a split in our culture, the deeply rooted conflict between the self and the other, long before it was dramatised on the world stage as our current manufactured 'clash of civilisations'. The truth, as Dick knew, was that we create our own world – with or without game developers, or even James Cameron. I have a proposal, then. Let's make Philip K Dick the patron saint of our new digital frontier. Let's remind ourselves that his troubled and provocative instinct for questioning authority is a balm for our own split minds. Let's move into Cameron's crazy, balls-out sci-fi world and, like Dick, go calmly, sensibly, purposefully insane.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Granta





BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

Grumble feature enabled

Throwing the online switch

I spent a long time refusing to play games online. My experience of it had been hampered by connection problems, and horrible computer boys who'd memorised every single last inch of their games, and knew exactly how to humiliate and frustrate novice players (presumably the only way these pallid, palsied social inadequates can assert any sense of control over their lives). I found online gaming so unwelcoming that I genuinely couldn't foresee a time when any right-minded individual would choose to play online against a bunch of faceless strangers over, say, playing against friends in their living room. Friends who viewed playing games more as something fun to do rather than as a way to plug up gaping wounds in their sense of self-worth.

That's all changed now, of course – I'm a card-carrying online gamer, having swallowed the largest slice of humble pie my gullet could accommodate. In fact, I'd go as far to say that since discovering the joys of online gaming I've spent more time playing games in the last six months than I had in the previous three years.

Truth be told, a lot of my resistance was borne out of certain industry commentators proclaiming that online gaming was firmly established when clearly that wasn't remotely the case. For a long time it was all a bit like John Logie Baird inventing Celebrity Big Brother before the TV. Even so, while the likes of Xbox Live, *World Of WarCraft* and *Battlefield 2* may have literally rocked my trousers over the last 12 months, there's still some way to go before online gaming is as ubiquitous as some people already seem to think it is.

Why, some lunatics are even predicting that online multiplayer gaming is poised to kill off singleplayer gaming. According to one **Lars Butler**: "Linear entertainment in singleplayer is to media what masturbation is to sex."

No, Lars Butler is not a committed lunatic, nor a man who only thinks in sexual metaphors. Lars Butler is actually a former vice president of online operations for EA. Worryingly, Butler isn't alone in his dirty thinking. "The entire videogame industry's history thus far has been an aberration, a mutant monster only made possible by unconnected computers," bellows one **Raph Koster**, former chief creative officer at Sony Online Entertainment, speaking, as was Butler, on an online gaming panel in California.

For far too long now gaming executives have been declaring the death of the singleplayer game, and for far too long I've been feeling a sense of creeping dread at the back of my pants.

> I genuinely couldn't foresee a time when any right-minded individual would choose to play online against a bunch of faceless strangers

According to Koster, "The players, once they go connected, they don't go back. They find it difficult to go back to experiences where they can't share experiences with others."

By that reckoning I'm clearly something of an aberration, as far as 'the players' go. The two games I'm playing most at the moment are the multiplayer side of *Call Of Duty 2*, and the not-even-slightly-multiplayer-let-alone-online *Black*. Now get a load of this crazy assertion: I enjoy them equally. I don't sit there playing *Black* whilst bemoaning the lack of online component; I enjoy it for what it is. A ghost train, a playground of destruction, a mostly linear, finite experience, but a beautifully designed one.

Presumably if Koster and Butler worked in book publishing they'd be advocating that paper fiction was a thing of the past, and we'd all soon be pulping our novels in favour of live roleplaying and murder mystery dinner parties. I mean, it's an absolutely mental point of view. Some types of game simply don't work online – just look at what happened to *Resident Evil* when Capcom tried it.

I'm still mourning the premature demise of the 2D platform game since game designers became obsessed with polygons (thank god for the Nintendo DS). Am I now to think that online gaming is going to lynch even more of my favourite genres? Heck, it's not even genres – just the simple joy of playing a well-designed game on my own. It's the difference between feeling like Bruce Willis in Die Hard and actually being part of The A-Team, I suppose.

Of course, I've been proved wrong before. Maybe a company like Valve will surprise me and release an entirely multiplayer *Half-Life 3*, and I'll have to eat the rest of that humble pie (by which time it'll probably have gone off, and I'll get the runs). But I'm certain that – providing the suits don't get their way – solo gaming will never go away, nor will there ever be a demand from players to make it go away. Let's face it, sometimes you just want a quick wank without having to pay for a prostitute, and go into that whole thing of pretending how she is, and choosing what you want off the menu, and having to apologise when you bite her...

Too much detail?

Still, I'll say one thing for Xbox Live – I've now been called a faggot by actual Americans, Dutch, French, and (on one particularly memorable occasion) a Brazilian. I don't recall that ever happening in *Super Mario World*. Truly, that is progress.

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television

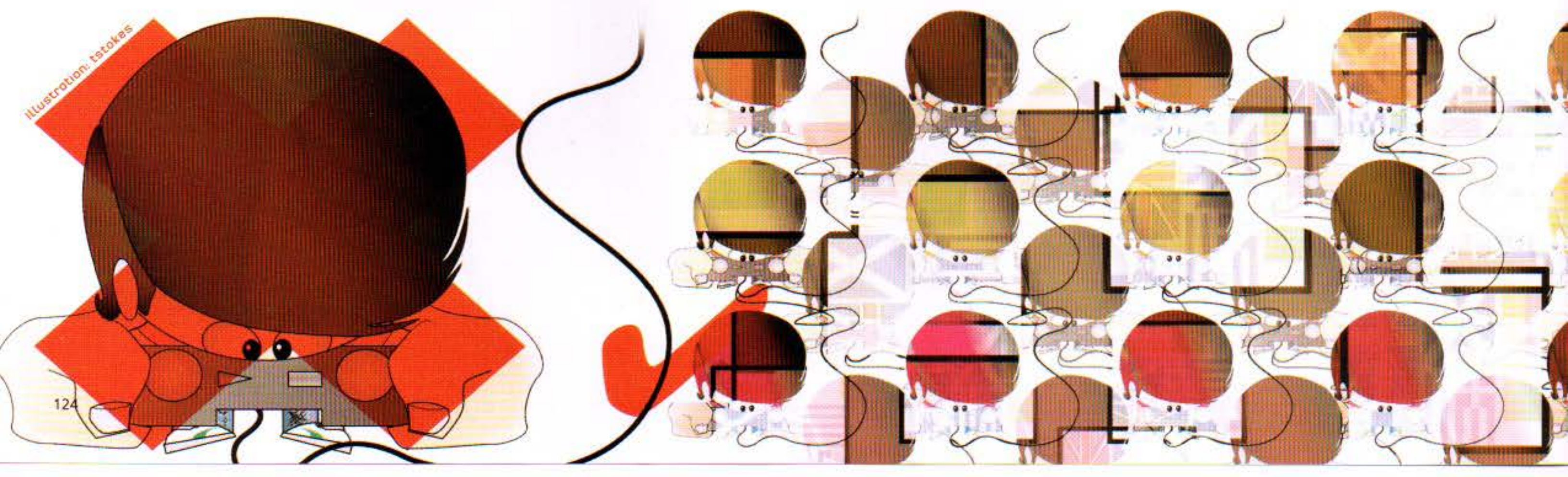
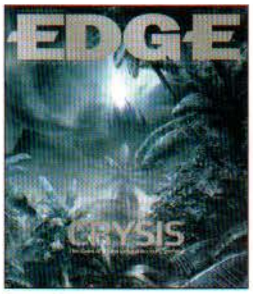


Illustration: tstokes

inbox



Issue 161

ONLINE OFFLINE
Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

Topic: The Haiku Thread
Over the green hill
A trail of blue, what is that?
Robotnik tastes fear

A gleeful cackle
Heaven smiles upon me now
Go for gold, Harman
Kazuo

Leon shrugs shoulders
Shambling corpses once again
Capcom: NOT ZOMBIES!
Pause

Up Down Up Down Down
Up Down Left Right
Chu Chu Chu!
Left Right Left Right Chu!
gazimod

Back to work for me
The princess can save herself
Now where are my tools
mgdot

Just a normal guy
In a Lovecraftian hell
That's all you need, Boll
exidor

Photorealism. It might be technically impressive but the trend towards increasingly well-replicated aspects of life in gaming is a little tiresome. Take *Fight Night: Round 3*, for example. This may be a very good game, and, yes, it does look spectacular, but I'd be much more tempted to play *Ready 2 Rumble* on the Dreamcast than the jazzed-up, shiny EA title (although I'm not especially likely to play either one, to be honest).

Of course games should have a sense of realism. Without boundaries anything could happen, but there's a difference between this and 'realistic' titles. I don't find it surprising that the most keenly anticipated and raved-about games recently have been ones such as *Psychonauts* and *We Love Katamari* – hardly what you'd call realistic, are they? As with the film industry, games need to look for a wider spectrum. Just as not every film can be a blockbuster, every other game should not feature gritty street crime or excessive realism, or else the industry runs the risk of becoming stagnant.

This isn't a new argument, I know. But the most telling sign of how nondescript gaming could become is emphasised by recent character design, most evidently shown on **E**158's cover. The more original (ie, less human looking) the character was, the more recognisable it seemed to be. Does this then have an adverse effect on gameplay? If the majority of gamers today want to control human characters in a digital city so well crafted they never have to leave the house then so be it – but I'd want to be more visually enticed. It's like painting a landscape when you have a digital camera – you could copy every detail, but why not put your own individuality into it? I think the majority of gamers would welcome the creation of worlds we've never seen before in a style that fits the game, rather than giving the diet of guns, grit and gore that seems to dominate the industry. Obviously this mainstream needs to exist in order to provide an alternative, but it looks as if the next generation will add more polish to what we already have – and is this worth the RRP at launch?
Craig Williams

It's all well and good games sharing similarities with films, but it should never be the selling point. If games put all their effort into being like films, they'll die

The harsh reality of it is that some developers will continue to chase the goal of creating games whose imagery cannot easily be told apart from reality until that goal is reached. Once that happens, clearly the only way to go will be into more experimental areas of presentation. How long will this take? Well, place your bets.

I have rarely written to magazines, and never for any reason other than 'for a laugh', but seeing the advertisement for *The Plan* on p125 of **E**161 drove me to the laptop. What was it that incensed me so? A single quote: 'A high-tech and super-cool crime thriller straight out of Hollywood'.

Great. I'll tell you what: I'll play *Mario Kart DS*, or *We Love Katamari*, and then watch an actual Hollywood film. It's all well and good games sharing similarities with films, but it should never be the selling point. If games put all their effort into being like films, they'll die. We'll end up with a billion FFVII: Advent Childrens.

I see it like this: first, we have books. Their only purpose is to tell a story. A good story will make a good book. Then you have films. They tell a story, but eye candy is also important. How good would your favourite film be if it were filmed on a mobile phone? Then you have games. The story and eye candy can play a part, but both take second seat to gameplay. You can't interact with films.

OK, now I've got that out of my system. Relax...
Luke Summerhayes

The irony here is that *The Plan* (4/10, **E**160) had more fresh gameplay ideas than many less cinema-inspired titles.

Reading articles in both your (and other, less impressive) magazines recently I find myself a little confused with the discrepancy between comments made about Nintendo's DS and my own experiences with the machine. When it was launched, Nintendo proclaimed that we would be playing games the likes of which we had never experienced before. I'm not faulting the touchscreen or any of the other features of the soon-to-be dinkier little machine, it's just that it seems to have totally failed to exploit its innovations. Scanning over web reviews I find the majority of high-scoring titles – *Mario Kart*, *Advance Wars*, *Castlevania* et al – do not use the touchscreen capability in any productive way, and there are very few titles released in Europe that do exploit the touchscreen which aren't described in the closing comments as an entertaining diversion, nothing more.

This isn't an attack at the DS – the possibilities seem endless – more an

attack on the lack of imagination of the games released in the UK. I'm trying to imagine what the DS's library is like in Japan, as your article expressed the differences. Could it be that the Japanese, who have been enjoying gaming as part of their culture for longer than those in the west, are more receptive to new and unique gaming experiences than western gamers? And, if so, what does this mean for the release of the Revolution? Maybe Nintendo should hold it back until the west is ready.
Robert Scott

The sign of a good DS game is how wisely it chooses the best aspects of the machine to use, which may or may not involve the touchscreen. But if that's what you're after then *Wario Ware Touched*, *Yoshi's Touch & Go*, *Trauma Centre: Under The Knife* and *Nintendogs* all fit the bill. There's no question, though, that Nintendo has its work cut out preparing the western market for Revolution.



Robert Scott is searching for a UK DS title that makes appropriate use of the hardware's touchscreen. Is *Brain Training* the answer?

A game containing Japanese-voiced characters is made and released in Japan. Meanwhile, considerable amounts of time, money and resources are spent on dubbing the game into various languages, mainly English, for release into other territories, usually turning out quite painful on the ears with big-name actors who couldn't care less about the end result droning their way through an hour's worth of lines to collect their cash. This is the point at which gamers who care about such things then complain that they want original Japanese dialogue with English subtitles where it applies. *Ninja Gaiden* could be cited as one example: Ryu Hayabusa is Japanese, the game is set in an oriental setting with a storyline and legend to match yet, by default on western versions, Ryu is voiced by an American. This is wrong and breaks the illusion immediately. Thankfully, Team Ninja's production values and appreciation of what gamers want are such that they included Japanese dialogue as an option in *Ninja Gaiden*, but many other developers are not as forthcoming with this choice.

Ryu Hayabusa is Japanese, the game is set in an oriental setting with a storyline and legend to match yet, by default, Ryu is voiced by an American

Surely the solution is to have all voiced characters in a game speak dialogue in their native tongue with subtitles provided for all markets. This would add to the immersion of a title, as well as cut down on time and money spent on development as translation would be merely a text file, something which is much cheaper to produce than the spoken word. It would also aid deaf gamers because every game would come with a subtitle option. It seems to be a sensible proposition that would benefit all parties in the chain, from developers to publishers to gamers. Tell me, **Edge**, why isn't it happening?
Justin

Dragon Quest VIII shows the value of a sensitive localisation job, but we'll agree there's little reason not to include the original voicing with subtitles where possible. Larger-capacity storage media should make multiple-language tracks more common in the future.

I feel the need to write in regarding the comments made by Biffovision last month regarding the Xbox 360 launch. To suggest that it would have been better for me had Microsoft waited six months before launching the 360 in Europe is nonsense. How can ensuring I do not have the console for six months be better than having the chance to own one at the same time as everyone else? Whilst it's true that the launch could have been better (I'm sure even Microsoft would admit that), I was lucky enough to be one of the reported 70,000 people who managed to buy a 360 at the launch, something Biffovision would take away from me, it seems. With deliveries continuing, anyone who seriously wants the system should be able to obtain a unit within the six months of proposed denial. I applauded Microsoft for at least trying not to treat me as a third-class citizen just because I live in Europe.

It's interesting to note that Sony are now planning a worldwide launch for PS3. We will assume they will have learned some lessons from the Xbox 360's less-than-perfect entry into the market, but let's not forget that both the PS2 and PSP were in short supply upon launch – indeed it was as hard to find a PSP at Christmas as it was the Xbox 360, despite being launched nine months after its Japanese debut.
Richard Bacon

Some of the reader opinion I have seen expressed in this magazine recently, as well as those making their points vociferously online in forums, has surprised me. I was not expecting Nintendo's ambitious Revolution project to gain much vocal support, and certainly not this early in development, but many people in and around the industry share the view that innovation is required if videogames are to avoid the relatively common fate shared by most entertainment media: stagnation.

Of course, I should not have been surprised. Indeed, now I have thought about it in slightly more depth, I realise that had I been wearing my hat of realism (it's a symbolic hat, not a real one, I assure you) this reaction is exactly the one I should have expected from the people who buy this magazine. It is a view expressed by the majority of more experienced gamers who will generally be more difficult to impress with sequels or derivative and broken 'original' titles. The problem is, however,

continued

F

Topic: Killing in the name of...
Is anyone interested in literally trying this? Having a month of pacifist gaming? You can play any game you like, from *GTA* to *Electroplankton*, but if you kill, you lose. Anyone wanting to take part can post here regarding how its affecting their gaming habits and so on. What do you think?
Growl

I've recently been playing co-op on *SWAT 4* and you can select non-lethal weapons but even with this option I like my lethal weapons with me. Unfortunately the choice of a pro-life gaming month isn't in my hands, it's in the hands of the enemy AI. If they comply you'll have yourself a success story right here, if not then I will join the ranks of everybody else in failing your impossible mission...
PermiaN

The *Sonic Mega Collection* is your friend for this challenge. One of my favourite things about *Sonic* games is that fact that you're not killing robots; you're freeing the cute animals!
daviest11

I'm not so sure about this... yes, you are freeing cute animals, but you are destroying another form of artificial life in order to do so. Think of the cute animal as the beating heart of a larger more complex creation... I mean, come on... Evil robots are human too... Oh... wait... The more I think about it, Dr Robotnik was an industrialist genius...
spleendonkey

Mario Kart DS... will have to do. I reckon I can do it, though.
ChopperByrne

No good, I'm afraid. Where do you think all those shells come from?
Padster

Haven't played *SM64*, have we? The koopas that were in those shells are now running around in their underpants. Worst that could happen to them is catching a cold.
Dandy Kong

I believe games are no longer made for those people.

People are understandably bewildered at how the Xbox 360 can become the fastest-selling games console in history despite having a launch line-up that has arrived straight off the boardroom table of 'Generic, Average, Mildly Entertaining and Shiny Games, Inc'. The reason is that (generally) the people who buy this magazine: a) will probably buy all three next-gen consoles anyway, and b) only make up a fraction of the overall consumer market Microsoft is targeting.

Thanks to the massive growth of the industry, the same kids who listen to gangster rap on their shiny new iPods, and the same troglodytes that wear six-inch-thick gold chains with sportswear and relentlessly drone on about their modded Vauxhall Corsa, will have a 360 and be more than happy with lazy *FIFA* and *NFSU* sequels and that new, overused lighting effect that makes people look laminated. These people are now the ones being catered for by developers. They are the ones that allow the studios to make games like *Bulletproof* and *True Crime*, and they will lap it up because it's cool. These new games appeal to the new mass market and so will outsell games like *Katamari Damacy*, *Ico* and *Colossus* many times over.

The Revolution, I fear, will share a similar fate. Far from Nintendo's claim of trying to reach brand new demographics, the console may in fact simply galvanise the oldest market, the people who've been playing games since the ZX Spectrum. While this will undoubtedly be a marvellous strategy in Japan, here in the west, unfortunately, there just aren't enough of those guys around to prevent the final roll of the dice from Nintendo being just that – final.

With the top-drawer franchises all nearing the end of their natural lifespan in the upcoming generation (*Metal Gear*, *Resident Evil*, *Gran Turismo*, *Tomb Raider*, etc), many people are wondering where the next killer app is coming from. The bleak pessimism in the darkest recesses of my heart fears that there isn't one – and, even worse, that neither Sony nor Microsoft actually need one.

Jonathan Mack

The worst thing about games like *Bulletproof* really isn't the subject matter, it's the fact that they're shit. You have to fear for the message being sent to the wider gaming community.

F

Topic: Gamers you met while shopping?

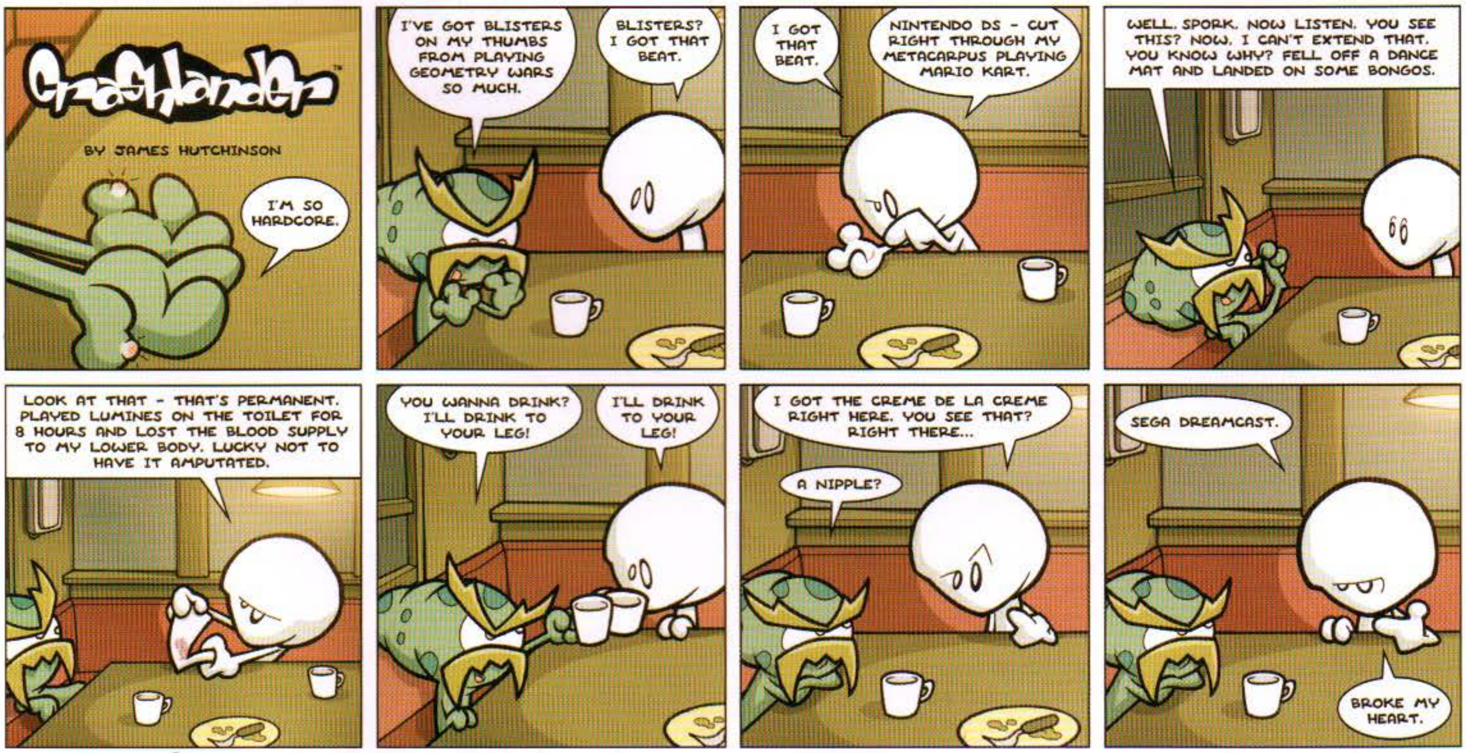
Ever chat with other gamers while shopping or testing games in a game store? Did you continue gaming with them online/offline? Not everyone we know likes gaming, but at game stores everyone's a gamer, so that should be the perfect place to chat with other gamers. I read about that guy who stayed inside some big store all day (actually several days in a row, it was a 24-7 store) playing games and how he met all kinds of people. Sounds like great fun, it's like visiting the arcades except it's completely free.

sucraloser

Sounds incredibly boring actually. And, to be honest, the idea of randomly talking to someone who is quietly doing their shopping freaks me out! But why don't you try it?

Google

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